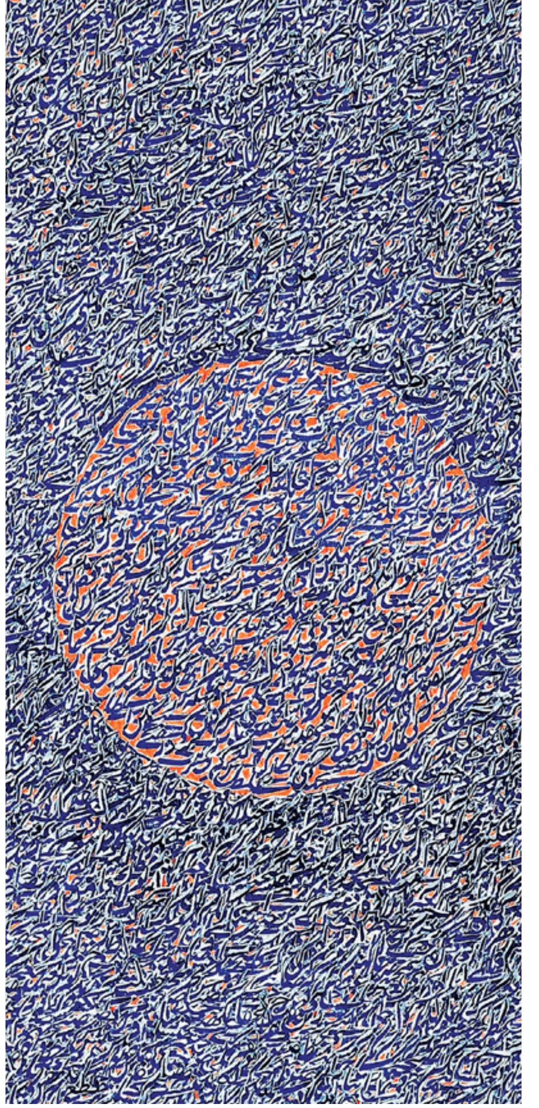
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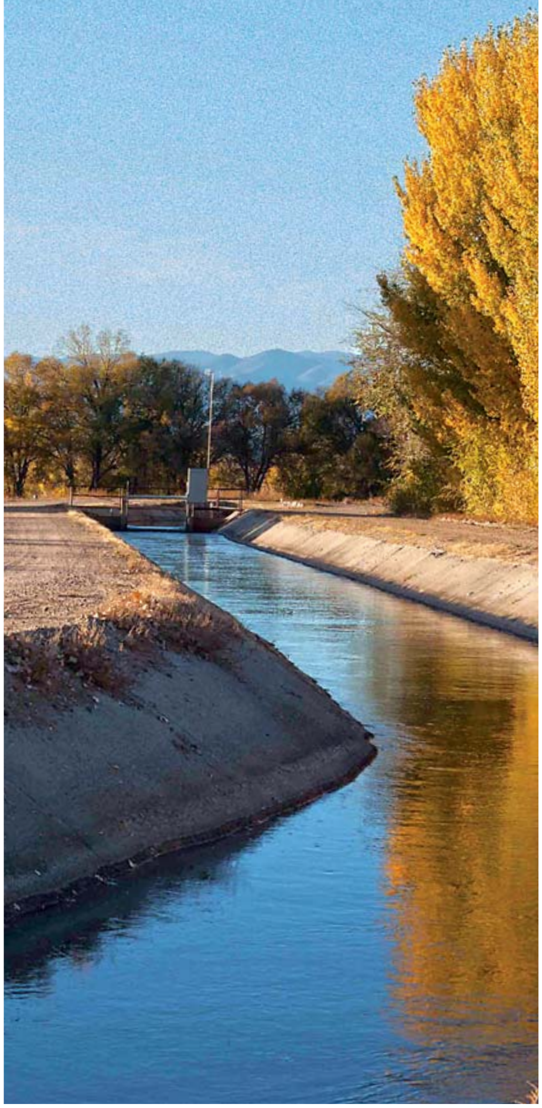
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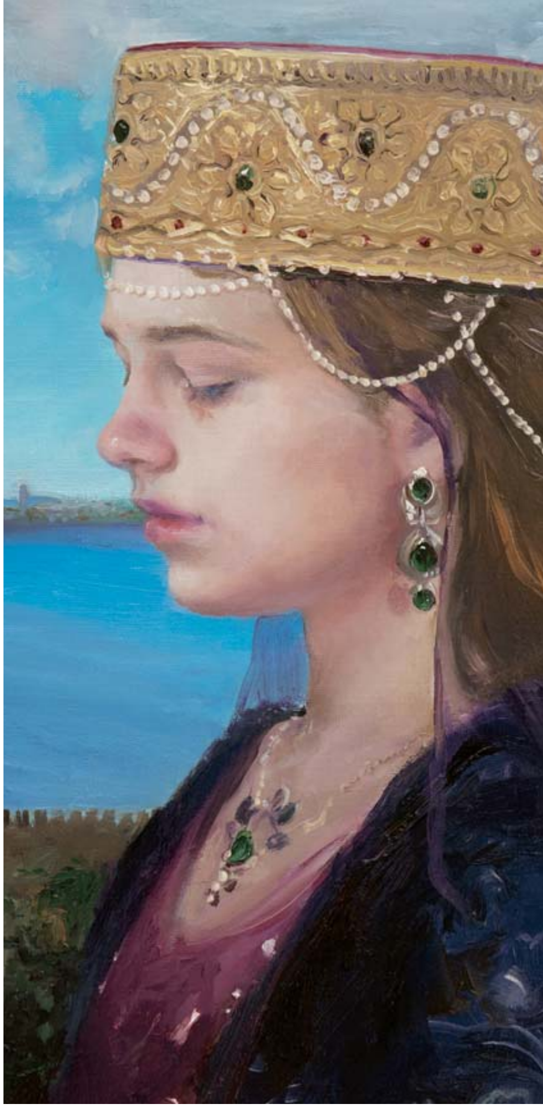
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Front and back cover: Viewed from satellite altitude during the dry season of winter, the deep greens of the Sundarbans stand out in contrast to the inland crop and livestock farms, shrimp farms and villages that surround the protected region. In the monsoon spring, the vast, tangled delta swells, filtering waters and accumulating ecologically beneficial silt deposits. Composite of Landsat 7 images by Jesse Allen / NASA Earth Observatory / USGS.







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FIRST LOOK

Iftar nights

Sunday, June 26, 8:42 p.m., Howard County, Maryland

Photograph by Johnny Hanson

We dug in, as we always do, just moments after sunset, as soon as it was time to break this day's 16-hour Ramadan fast. As cell phone apps played calls to prayer in near synchrony, a small, hungry crowd descended upon the buffet table. On this night it was a potluck *iftar* with a heritage theme, and the food mirrored some of the incredible diversity of suburban Baltimore itself: There was Malaysian tapioca cake (*bingo ubi kayu*), Ecuadorian empanadas, Bosnian stew (*Bosanski lonac*), Uighur steamed squash and lamb dumplings (*petir manta*), Italian escarole and beans (*scarola e fagipoli*), African-American bean pie, Senegalese peanut stew (*mafe ginaar*) and beignets (*puff puff*), Palestinian lentil soup (*shorabit adas*) and St. Thomas jerk chicken—all shared along with stories of their origins among friends old and new. Iftar means "fast breaking" in Arabic, and the socializing that goes along with it is a worldwide hallmark of the month of Ramadan, which this year began on June 6 and ended with *'id al-fitr* ("feast of the fast breaking") on July 5. (Following US Independence Day, this gave us a delightful double holiday.) In an upcoming feature article, I'll be sharing some of the recipes you see on this table.

—Laila el-Haddad, author of "Gaza's Food Heritage" (N/D 11)



The world's largest mangrove forest is home to hundreds of species and, mostly along its edges, 4 million people.

FOREST *of* TIDES

THE SUNDARBANS



WRITTEN BY *Louis Werner* PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Shahidul Alam*







Slipping through a narrow creek in territory inhabited by the endangered Bengal tiger, the crew of the *R.B. Emma, above,* keeps alert. Covering some 140,000 hectares, the Sundarbans mangrove forest is home to diverse wildlife, including the macaque monkey, *far left.* Although tigers prey mostly on spotted deer, attacks on humans are a serious matter: "This happened in 1992 when I went fishing," says Hashmat, *left,* a fisherman from the Satkhira District. "While I was sleeping in a boat, a tiger came onto the boat and attacked me. The left side of my face was badly injured. Luckily, my fellow fishermen were able to kill the tiger and save me."



Split not quite in half by the border between India to the west and Bangladesh to the east, crowning the Bay of Bengal, the world's most complex river delta works like South Asia's showerhead—one the size of Lebanon or Connecticut. Fed by Himalayan snowmelt and monsoon runoff, carrying a billion tons a year of Asian landmass suspended as sediment, the three great flows of the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers all end in one vast estuarial tangle, one of Earth's great water filters, the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans.

In seasonal rhythm with the monsoon, more than 450 curling rivers and creeks make up this vast showerhead's nozzles, running full in the hot, rainy summer and sluggish in the warm, dry winter. Some waterways clog with sediment for years, or forever; new ones form. Others get dammed or channeled by shrimp and rice farmers. As disruptive as these can be to a hydrological dance that balances the freshwater flows with the salty tides that drift tens of kilometers inland, they are nothing so dramatic as the occasional cyclone that pushes the sea itself far back up the showerhead.

Stretching this image farther, imagine this great shower's bathtub is slowly filling up from below as the sea level rises three to eight millimeters a year, according to a 2015 report by the World Bank. Four million people who make their homes and livelihoods here (mostly on the Bangladesh side) are increasingly wetting their feet—and it's not just people, for the world's largest mangrove forest is also among the richest terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems anywhere.

At night in the mangrove jungle, newcomers can be forgiven for hoping to hear a Bengal tiger's roar. (Locals are understandably less enthusiastic.) But there are only about 100 of them left here, and their movements are largely silent. From the gentle rocking of a river boat's bunk, the only sounds are subtle ones: the incoming tide lapping against a thicket of salt-tolerant mangrove roots; the slurred *wieuw-wieuw* call of a mangrove pitta; a distant, watery exhalation from a bottle-nosed *shushuk*, as the freshwater Ganges dolphin is called in Bangladesh.

We put out from Khulna, Bangladesh's third largest city and the one nearest the Sundarbans. Muhammad Alam Sheikh, with 35 years' experience amid the 12,000 kilometers of rivers here, captains a boat owned by The Guide Tour Company. Over five days, he says, we will cover some 200 kilometers, dropping in on villages and forests along the way. He has recently been fishing off Dublar Char island, on the Bay of Bengal's sea side, and he helmed a dolphin research expedition to the nearby Swatch of No Ground, a delightfully named submarine canyon that cuts through the delta's offshore sedimentary fan. In May 2009 he was caught out at sea by Cyclone Aila, where Category Five winds blew him 25 kilometers into Indian waters.

On this more peaceful winter excursion far outside cyclone season, Sheikh points out the languid surfacing and noisy breathing of the shushuk, and explains that the flat-headed Irrawaddy dolphin, or *irabati*, is not found so far upriver. According to the Wildlife Conservation Society's Bangladesh

With 35 years' experience navigating the 12,000-kilometer labyrinth of the Sundarbans, captain Muhammad Alam Sheikh, like many others, makes his living off the water. His *R.B. Emma* most frequently hosts fishing tours, research expeditions and ecotourism.



Cetacean Diversity Project, the upper Bay of Bengal's coastal waters are a "hotspot of cetacean abundance and diversity."

Most famously, the Sundarbans mangrove forest is a refuge for the endangered *Panthera tigris tigris,* or Bengal tiger, and the only mangrove forest in the world in which tigers live. On the Indian side, which comprises some 40 percent of the Sundarbans delta-estuary ecosystem, the protection of Sundarbans National Park keeps them relatively at a distance from humans; in Bangladesh, however, forest preserve mangroves are often just across narrow creeks—and tigers love to swim!—from villages where slow-moving goats and cows can tempt a carnivore whose diet otherwise consists mainly of spotted deer.

To UNESCO, the future of the Sundarbans lies in "biodiversity, aesthetic values and integrity"—as well as management of ecological balances challenged by development.

The settlement of Kalabogi lies opposite a northern boundary of Bangladesh's Sundarbans Forest Reserve, across the small Sutarkhali River, which is like a canal between the larger Pasur and Shibsa Rivers. For several years now, Muhammad Farouk Hossein Shahna has taken part in his village's tiger-response team: With the others, he is trained to drive tigers back across the river using a combination of pot banging and group encirclement.

"We warn neighbors to stay indoors when a tiger approaches our village," he says. Accidental encounters often lead to death—not only for humans, but also for the tigers. Two years ago, he says, a tiger entered a neighbor's animal pen at night and killed seven goats without making a sound. "They come in silence but they leave with a roar," he says. "We called a forest warden who shot blank fire into the air, and the tiger swam back to its rightful place."

Twelve-year-old Hridoy Mullah remembers that early morning. "I felt safe, surrounded by many men," says the boy with only a hint of bravado. But no one is entirely safe. Village elder Abdul Bari tells of climbing a *gewa* tree to escape a tiger that clawed its way up the trunk right behind him. Bitten on the foot, he managed to reach back and gouge its eyes with his fingers. "And this was only one of 13 I've seen face to face over my life," he says.

Residents of Dacope, one of the many dozens of villages that cluster along riverbanks along the northern fringes of the Sundarbans, build homes mostly in the traditional way: bamboo, thatch and mud. For such villages, the mangroves that reach some 50 or more kilometers to the south act as a buffer against the surges and winds of cyclones.



In Gabura Union residents dig a pond that will be filled with fresh water, which is becoming increasingly scarce in parts of the region as sea levels rise three to eight millimeters a year and shrimp farms add salty water to freshwater rivers.



Nearby, the river port of Nalian is a prosperous town on the banks of the Shibsa River, with an iron jetty for barges and a ferry and a concrete two-story school. Even here, 80 kilometers inland, Aila hit with a vengeance, and floodwaters stayed for months, says teacher Abu Sattar Mostafa Kamal. He helped organize the 1,500 people who sheltered in his school, which was one of the few local buildings designed to withstand a cyclone's winds. "We maintained the students' courage by singing songs and acting out dramas about the storm. They won't forget, but they also didn't fear."

River banks here are dotted with the overturned hulls of cargo boats used for hauling a mainstay of the local economy, *golpatta*, or nipa palm, whose fronds are used for thatching on village roofs. At this time of year, the boats are being re-tarred on the muddy banks before the rainy season sets in. The golpatta has adapted to the high salinity of the mangrove biome, and although some controlled cutting is allowed seasonally in the forest reserve, most of the 2 million kilograms that are harvested each year in the region now come from farms and backyard village plots.

Parimal Chandra Sarkar in Balindhanga is one such farmer. He diversifies his products by tapping date trees for syrup and pickling the fruit of the *keora*, the mangrove forest's most common tree, with sweet and chili flavors. The golpatta's heart fruit is edible, he says, although not now in season. He is proud that his palms are ready for harvest only two years after planting—a year sooner than average. His trees, he speculates, must like the waters that rise with the tide and lap at his home's embankment twice a day.

Not far from Sarkar's house, shrimp fry fishermen are setting fine mesh box nets at the tide's change in midstream from their symmetrical, high-prow and high-stern canoes called *dingi*s. Others pull basket nets behind them from the river banks. You have to look hard to even see shrimp fry: A couple centimeters long (at most), they are gelatinous wisps of see-through thread. A catch of 500 is considered a good day, but the most tedious work occurs back at home, when the fry are sieved through cheesecloth (colored black the better to see them) into aluminum water vessels. Dead ones are cast aside, and the live fry are counted, one by one.

Many of these fishermen are in debt to the middlemen who finance their boats and nets. It is these market-savvy operators who profit most from the area's exploding shrimp farm industry, which feeds the appetites of restaurant and supermarket patrons worldwide, whetted by the prospect of a former delicacy available at a fast-food price. However, these aquacultures pose a serious threat to the environment and to local communities because shrimp farmers are cutting down mangrove forests to make room for more shrimp ponds and dumping saline wastewater from them along the northern edges of the Sundarbans.

Uma Baida Kushi stands with her children in Vamira, a village where some 20 women have left the heavy work of dragging fishnets to knit and sew handmade dolls that are sold in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.



West along a tributary, near Koyra Bridge—one of only a few bridges in a region where rivers are generally crossed by ferryboat—Rabindranath Sana makes his living as a honey collector down in the mangrove forests,

where he has been venturing for 50 of his 65 years. He goes in April and May, when he can follow bees as they fly from flowering trees back to their hives. As these are normally high up a tree trunk, he begins by setting a smoky fire of golpatta fronds. This, he explains, stupefies the bees, allowing him to send a younger man shimmying up to cut off the hive's branch and then drain the honey into a barrel.

"It takes a full day of river travel to arrive at the forest's best honey grounds," he says, "and we stay out there a month to capture the sequential flowering of three different mangrove trees: the *khalshi*, which makes a light honey; then *garan*, which colors darker; and finally *baen*, which flows runny" (and which is known by its Linnaean taxonomy as *Avicennia officinalis*, named for the Muslim scientist Ibn Sina).

"The six men on our honey team sleep in the boat at night, afraid of the tiger," says Sana. "I've seen plenty of pugmarks [footprints] and heard many roar, but I've never come face to face." He might consider himself lucky, for as the 17th-century Frenchman François Bernier noted in his book *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, "these ferocious animals are very apt to enter into the boat itself while the people are asleep, to carry away some victim who generally happens to be the stoutest and fattest of the party."

In a good season, Sana says he can get 160 liters of honey and 10 kilograms of beeswax, his statistical contribution to the average annual national harvest of 120 tons of honey and 30 tons of beeswax. The wax, he says, is mostly made into candles for city people to use when their electricity fails. "We men of the village," he adds, "never used to rely on electric light anyway, so why should we keep candles for when it fails?" He grins. "Kerosene lanterns were fine for us." He does keep some honey back from the market, however, mostly to make *payesh*, a sweet rice and milk dessert.

Bangladeshis pride themselves as one of the most literary peoples on earth, and their lyrical songs and poems are best known through the works of Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who died in 1941 at age 80. But Tagore's predecessor was Michael Madhusudan Dutt, born in 1824 on the banks of the Kopodakka River in Jessore district, north of the Sundarbans. He wrote the Bengali language's most famous sonnet, *"Kapatakkha Nad,"* an ode to the river. It is memorized to this day by every Bangladeshi schoolchild. Crossing that same river downstream from his birthplace, Captain Sheikh's crewman recites a few lines:

> Always, O river, you enter my mind.
> In my loneliness I think of you.
> My ears soothe at the murmur
> Of your waters.
> Many a river I have seen on earth,
> But none quench thirst as do you,
> as flows milk from my homeland's breast.

Here, other common sights along the rivers' banks, often about seven meters of mud at low tide, include fish cages enclosed by timbers so they do not float away, in which salted catfish have been hung out like laundry in the sun. Elsewhere are stacks of split-bamboo crab traps, and, high and dry atop the banks, rice hay is heaped like onion domes. Blue-backed kingfishers, or *machrangas* (in Bengali, "colored kingfish"), and green-feathered pittas flash their respective hues as they fly from shore to shore. Wild boar and macaque monkeys come out onto the exposed flats, seeming curious to explore.

Add to these fauna dozens of others, such as dog-faced water snakes, blue-breasted quail, red-wattled lapwing, the spotted deer and just a few of the 240 species of insects found here, and





With a map of the Sundarbans mounted in his office, Hasan Mehedi, *above,* chief executive of the Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN), prepares an advocacy campaign for environmental conservation. The organization works to provide sustainable livelihoods of natural resource-dependent coastal communities. Teacher Abu Sattar Mostafa Kamal, *left,* helped shelter some 1,500 people at his school in Nalian on the banks of the Shibsa river after Cyclone Aila devastated the coastal region in 2009.



Boys walk through the courtyard of the school in Nalian, where the Shibsa and Sutarkhali rivers converge.

one sees just how rich is Sundarbans wildlife. And although estuarine crocodiles live here too, what look like crocodile slicks down the banks are in fact slides for dragging dingis, beached at high tide, back into the water when it's low.

Deeper into the southwestern part of the reserve, near the boundary waters, even Captain Sheikh is momentarily confused by a confluence of five distributaries in the morning fog. He shouts his uncertainty to a nearby fisherman. "*Bharat*!" ("India!") the fisherman answers, pointing to a border watchtower visible through the mist. Where the rivers mingle, the wide sheet of water is called a *mohona* (a common girl's name in Bangladesh), and then farther on they again separate, seeming to widen and tighten like bellows that pump not air but water, south into the Bay of Bengal. But the broadest parts can also be the shallowest, and low tide exposes mud flats.

One morning at mid-channel at low tide on the Kholpetua ("Big Belly") River, fisherman Muhammad Ayub Ali Mullah takes a break from setting his shrimp nets to come aboard the excursion boat run temporarily aground. Having been on the water since 5 a.m., he cannot refuse an invitation for tea and a chat with city folks. "I didn't like my two years in Dhaka as a day laborer," he says. "Here I can take my time and tend my garden and ducks and hens whenever the river says no to my nets." With a strong vibrato, he sings a song that he learned from the radio by Abdul Alim, Bangladesh's most famous lyricist.

The river is rough today; its waves are high.
How can we take out the boat?
Whoever manages will have a good catch.
But what can I do? The river is rough today.

The tide rises, setting free our boat. Following a creek up to Koikhali village, we are met by blue-uniformed and swagger-stick-carrying tree warden Muhammad Siraj al-Islam, who works for a local environmental organization. His job, he explains, is to protect from wandering goats a mix of



mangrove species along a three-kilometer stretch of communal embankment that acts as a cyclone buffer. He also plants the mangrove seeds that he nets and cleans on the ebb tide, and takes pride in showing off his fast-growing keora trees, the baen tree's bright orange bark rust that forms in winter and the *kakra*'s bullet-shaped seed pod that drops to the ground like a needle eager to germinate in the mud.

ment-run crocodile breeding center at Koromjol is popular with day visitors. Arriving aboard flower-bedecked and canopied launches, they roam a two-kilometer boardwalk through the forest where they can feed the crocs that, when they reach two meters in length, are released to the wild.

Boat operator Ruman Shikder shakes his head at the urbanites. "Some of my passengers come in dresses and suits and ties," he says and laughs. "I've had to pull more than one bride garbed in full wedding regalia out of the mud. All expect to see tigers. But how can you run from a tiger in high heels?" It goes unmentioned that Koromjol is too far from the deep forest for tigers to show up.



In a centuries-old tradition now nearly unique to the Sundarbans, fishermen in Gobra, Narail District, use trained otters—harnessed and leashed—to frighten fish, which gather along the banks, out to where the nets await. Rising salinity impacts freshwater fish stock throughout the Sundarbans.

At Khulna University, Dilip Datta is one of the world's top environmental scientists working on the Sundarbans. Unlike many colleagues and lay observers worldwide, he is not an alarmist about the future. "For the last 30 years, from the earliest satellite imagery until today, we see that our mangrove forest is stable," he says. While elsewhere in Asia some 30 percent of mangroves have been lost, mainly to coastal development, loss in the Sundarbans has been minimal. This is due largely to stiff restrictions on tree cutting in forest reserves on both sides of the border. The Sundarbans forest comprises half of the total tree cover for Bangladesh, and as mangroves can hold several times as much carbon as a rainforest, it sequesters some 56 million tons of carbon—a benefit to the entire world.

As Datta notes, through nature's good fortune, as the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna rivers' massive sediment load is swept from their collective mouth westward, along the seaward edge of the Sundarbans, strong high tides push more sediment ashore than the relatively weaker low tides pull away, causing a net gain of sediment. This rare asymmetry improves it as a cyclone buffer: The mangrove forest is higher facing the Bay of Bengal than it is inland.

As a result, Datta is less concerned about the local effects of global warming, potentially increased cyclone frequencies

In Vamira village, Farida Begum is sitting amid her 20 colleagues in the handicraft center that serves as an alternative income source for women who prefer not to drag heavy shrimp nets for a meager living. Instead, they crochet dolls, which are sent to Dhaka for sale. Farida explains that she earns 5,000 *taka* (US$60) per month when working nearly full time, and with that she finds room in her household budget to save a bit. Her daughter has just earned a bachelor's of science degree, and she is not likely to return to the village.

But Farida is ready to see her daughter better her life, just as she and her neighbors have bettered theirs. As night falls, a light bulb illuminates the porch, powered by the solar panel on the thatch roof. A friend claims to have a television at home, but when Farida questions her sharply, the friend admits it is simply her mobile phone with a memory stick downloaded with Indian soap operas. Farida's own phone, she says, gives her a new link to her far-flung family.

Along the Pasur River downstream from Khulna, a govern-

In Laudope Union, Khulna District, a family plays as the sun sets.



and sea level rise than he is about locally generated imbalances. These include oil-tanker spills on waterways and, especially, polder building, which reduces sedimentation where it is essential, as well as damming rivers, which increases sedimentation where it is harmful. “Our focus has until recently been incorrectly on a river’s carrying capacity rather than its drainage capacity, which is determined by siltation, or the lack thereof,” he says. “We need to better manage our silt, not our water.”

One of his concerns was recently reported by a Vanderbilt University research team in which he participates. Scientists found that polders, the Dutch word for the embankments built around reclaimed low-lying land used for rice cultivation, force water to flow faster around them, and this erodes sediment exactly where its deposition is most needed to protect forest margins from cyclone-driven storm surges.

In Bengali the name Sundarbans comes from *shundor bon*, “beautiful forest,” but the Mughals, who used it as a royal hunting preserve, referred to it using the word for “tide.” Thus Datta may be putting science behind something Indians and Bangladeshis have sensed for a long time: that to understand the Sundarbans, it must be seen as both forest and tide. Or to use his scientific language, as both sediment depositor and carrier.

But one need not be a professor to know the Sundarbans. Local experts aplenty can be found in the student-led Mangrove Club at Badamtala Laudop School. The 14-year-old club president, Pronoti Mridha, has just taken a three-day workshop taught jointly by the Khulna-based Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN) and the US-based Mangrove Action Project. She has learned much.

She answers correctly a series of rapid-fire questions: “Why might one see a swarm of bees out over the water, far from land? Which birds are resident, and which are migratory? Identify the links in the Sundarbans food chain.” Mridha stops after naming the 20 links she learned from a classroom exercise in which 20 students, each representing consecutive prey animals in the food chain, held a rope at even intervals: If one species disappeared, that section of rope fell to the ground, making it graphically clear that the entire chain was then in danger of extinction. Mridha ends her examination with a firm answer: “I want to be an entomologist—ants, not bees.”

The future of the Sundarbans lies in her hands and the hands of young people like her. If she grows to put her knowledge into action, if her country listens closely to her advice, so perhaps may the Sundarbans endure the challenges that come to it now, seemingly from all directions. ⊕



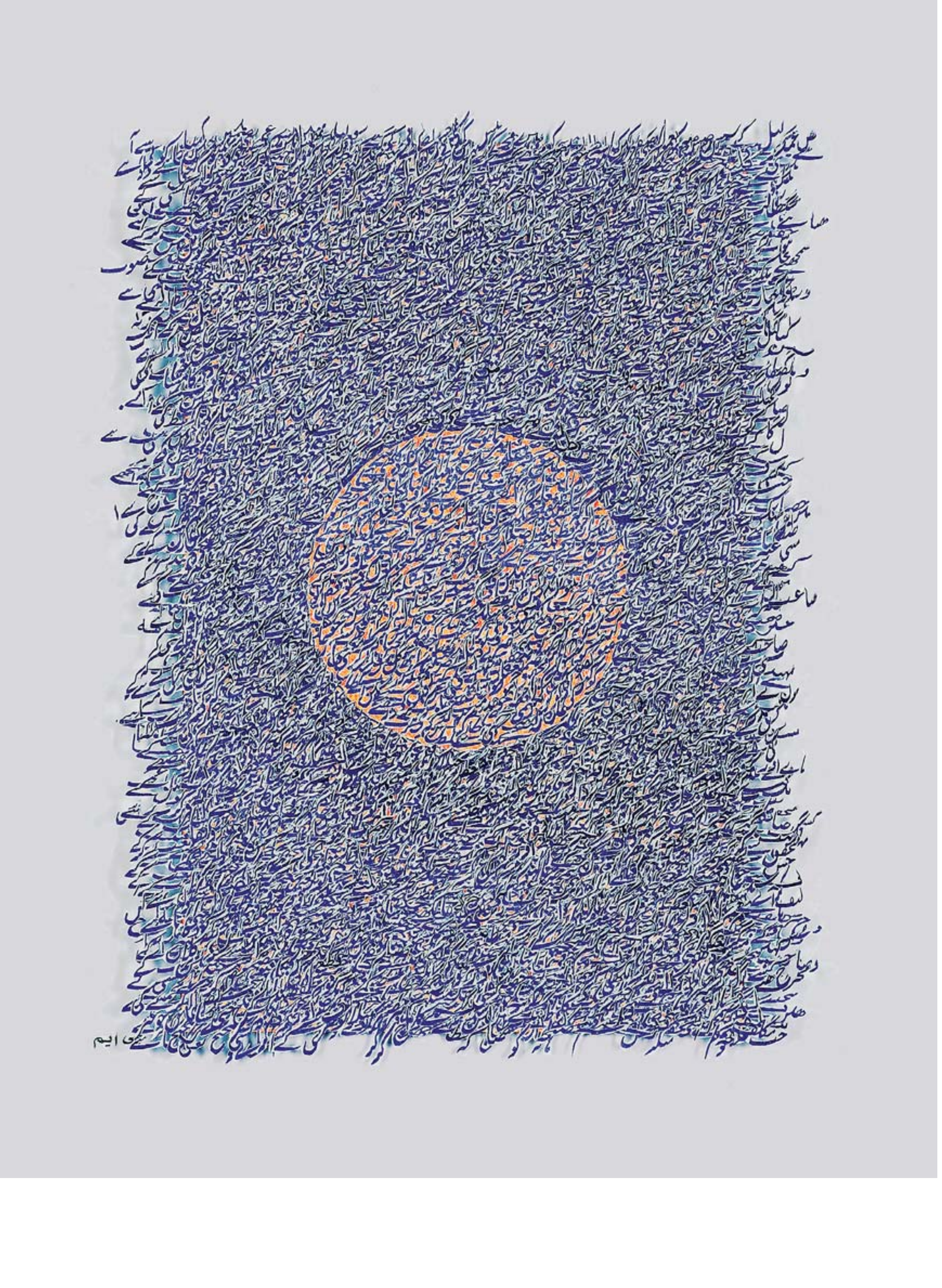
Louis Werner is a writer and filmmaker living in New York.



Shahidul Alam is the founder of Drik Picture Library (www.drik.net), the Bangladesh Photo Institute, Pathshala South Asian Institute of Photography, as well as the biennial Chobi Mela Festival of Photography in Asia. He lives in Dhaka.

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We live in times when culture matters, it seems, more than ever. Civilizations come and go, but what remains is their art, architecture and literature—their heritage. As a farsighted and increasingly influential award for today's art and design, the Jameel Prize is encouraging creativity that celebrates the heritage of our times, counterbalancing news of conflicts with other stories, tales that draw on art's universal themes of beauty, exploration and transformation.

MORE THAN ONE STORY

The JAMEEL PRIZE for CONTEMPORARY ART

WRITTEN BY
JULIET HIGHET

Every two years, the Jameel Prize is awarded for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition, encouraging artists to explore how long-established practices of Islamic art, craft and design can powerfully inform modern expressions. In doing so, the prize promotes dialogue about the role of Islamic culture in an era of sweeping change both in historically Islamic regions and beyond.

One such location that is no stranger to cultural dialogue is Istanbul, one of the world's oldest crossroads of cultures, and on June 7 the Pera Museum in that city hosted the ceremony announcing the fourth Jameel Prize. The Pera Museum blends its holdings of Ottoman and Orientalist art with changing contemporary art shows, mirroring the interchange of tradition and modernity of the prize. Some of the work of the 11 finalists, selected from 280 entries, was huge and startling. But the 2016 prize went to Ghulam Mohammed, a young artist from Lahore, Pakistan, for five small, intensely intricate, delicately textured works of paper collage.

First awarded in 2009, the Jameel Prize was founded as a cross-cultural partnership between Art Jameel, an arts and culture initiative in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, which also exhibits traditional and contemporary art. This year was the first time the prize was announced and the art of the finalists shown in an exhibition away from the V&A. This helps "widen public appreciation of the role played by Islam's great cultural heritage as a source for our own times," emphasizes Fady Jameel, president of Community Jameel International, a social-enterprise organization with projects in Saudi Arabia and around the world, including the Jameel Prize. He adds that rich and varied Islamic traditions are shared by more than a billion people across a huge area from Africa to Indonesia, and many more countries around the globe.

It was his father, Mohammad Jameel, who sponsored the redesign of the V&A's Islamic Middle East Gallery in 2006, when it was renamed the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art. That same year, Art Jameel established the Jameel Prize with an award amount of £25,000. From the start it has attracted entrants from around the world: The fourth cycle saw entries from five continents.

The prize's exhibitions have attracted international viewer attention, too, touring venues as diverse as San Antonio, Singapore, Moscow and Morocco. The inaugural prize exhibit, in 2009, traveled to six cities in the Middle East and North America, and the 2011 show toured four venues in France, Spain and the US. Jameel Prize 3 in 2013 visited four museums in Russia, the UAE and Singapore, and venues for the 2016 prize, which left Istanbul in August, will be announced soon.

Mohammed, who graduated just three years ago from Lahore's Beaconhouse National University, is the first Pakistani artist to win the prize. Born in a remote village in Balochistan, he won a scholarship to Beaconhouse. "It was



Ghulam Mohammed is the first artist from Pakistan to win the Jameel Prize.

UNTITLED
Gulam Mohammed
Collage on *wasli* paper
9 x 14 cm

COURTESY GHULAM MOHAMMED; OPPOSITE: USMAN JAVAID / V&A

In a process that can take months to create a single work, Mohammed cuts letters from antique books and reapplies them in layers on handmade *wasli* paper. "You have to be cool, calm and patient, breathing deeply," he says.



a miracle," says Mohammed, who studied international contemporary art, as well as Mughal miniature painting and calligraphy, all of which influenced his own work.

To create his art, Mohammad visits antiquarian bookshops in Lahore, where he buys texts in Urdu (the dominant language of Pakistan) and uses them to create three-dimensional artworks. Using a process that can take two to three months for each work, he cuts out individual letters, pastes them in layers onto handmade *wasli* paper, and sometimes embellishes them with gold and silver leaf. It's intense, concentrated work with results no larger than an average hand.

"If you create miniatures with tiny details, you have to be cool, calm and patient, breathing deeply," says Mohammed. "It's a kind of meditation, in which the process is very important. It's cathartic, and I feel very relaxed."

The Jameel Prize 4 panel of six judges was headed by the director of the V&A, Martin Roth, who praises Mohammed for his "excellence of concept and execution." He says he is happy the prize has been won "by such a promising young artist at the beginning of his career. The award has always been thoroughly international in character, open to artists and designers of any nationality or creed, whose work is inspired by Islamic cultural tradition."

The Jameel Prize is "the work of many hands," comments Tim Stanley, senior curator for the V&A's Middle Eastern Collection, who was responsible for developing the award and for curating all four editions. "It has drawn on the knowledge, wisdom and generosity of our network of nominators as well as our judges. It has grown, too, through the willingness of hundreds of talented artists and designers to participate. As a result, the prize can now be seen as an informal commonwealth of practitioners and commentators on their work."

The 2016 shortlist included "not … just a diversity of practices from sound to film to minimalist sculptures, but also evidence of a growing confidence in the artists, many with strong reputations in the global art world, to assert their multiple identities—both contemporary and rooted in Muslim cultures," notes Hammad Nasar, one of the judges and head of Research & Programs at Asia Art Archives in Hong Kong. "This is a welcome development, and it suggests that platforms such as the Jameel Prize can contribute to expanding our collective ideas of what global visual culture looks like."

London-based curator, writer, publisher and judge Rose Issa, who has championed the visual arts and film from the Arab world and Iran for the last 30 years, says the prize is helping to move the art world away from its Western orientation. "For many years the focus for the international art world was on Western art," she says. "The only books available on contemporary art focused on the same thing; the only references in art education were to Western modernist art. That is changing. It's very exciting now. The museum curators and gallerists know that if they stick to the Western model, they are going to be very local, and not global. … Alternative modernities are happening everywhere—in China, India, South America and so on."

The Jameel Prize can contribute to expanding our collective ideas of what global visual culture looks like.

—Hammad Nasar

Equal in value to the influential Turner Prize for contemporary art, the Jameel Prize is certainly worth winning, but like other art awards, the value is not just financial. Because of its two-year international touring agenda, the prize ensures global exposure and prestige that translate into further opportunities for creative commissions, exhibitions and recognition.

UNTITLED
Gulam Mohammed
Collage on *wasli* paper
9 x 14 cm

V&A; OPPOSITE: GHULAM MOHAMMED / V&A



Mahnaz Fancy, editor of Dubai-based *Canvas* magazine, calls the partnership between Art Jameel and the V&A a “cultural diplomacy mission.” The award “serves as a platform for negotiating stubborn cultural polarization between the so-called Western and Islamic worlds,” she says.

Roth agrees, calling the prize “a comment space for everyone, a safe environment, supported by an intellectual, academic framework. Artists can hold a mirror to themselves, asking questions in a neutral space.”

The scope of the Jameel Prize makes it unique, and defining its artistic parameters was a challenge, says Venetia Porter, curator of Islamic and contemporary Middle East art at the British Museum, who collaborated with Stanley to initiate the prize. “As scholars of Islamic arts, we clearly understood the complexities of this term ‘Islam.’ Should one, could one talk about a ‘contemporary Islamic art’? This [dilemma] became even clearer when the criteria for selection began to be formulated.”

In the end, the prescription for prize entries called for a clear link with “traditional practices of Islamic art and craft,” referring to “objects, ceramics, textiles, carpets, metalwork, glass, woodwork as well as architecture … created from the seventh to the 19th century in countries that were at any time under predominately Muslim rule.”

“Right from the beginning, we didn’t



The Jameel Prize 4 exhibit showed 11 finalist works in addition to the five winning works by Ghulam Mohammed, *left,* background.





Past Jameel Prize winners, from left: Afruz Amighi, “1001 Pages,” 2009; Rachid Koraïchi, “Les Maitres Invisibles” (“The Invisible Masters”), 2011; Dice Kayek, “Istanbul Contrast,” 2013.

TOP LEFT: NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY / V&A; CENTER AND RIGHT: V&A; OPPOSITE (2): SUNA AND INAN KIRAC FOUNDATION, PERA MUSEUM

call the [submitted] work ‘Islamic art’—it’s not about that,” explains Stanley. “Some artists are from Islamic countries but aren’t Muslim. For the first prize, we had a Jain, an Armenian jeweller from Istanbul and an Orthodox artist from Lebanon.”

For the 2016 prize, British-born artist David Chalmers Alesworth, who lived immersed in the culture of Pakistan for more than 20 years, submitted “garden carpets,” re-embroidering carpets of Baluchi and Iranian origin. Lucia Koch from Brazil offered what she called “architectural interventions” created with screens that characterized Brazilian homes from the 16th century when Portuguese settlers brought Islamic traditions with them to the New World.

Alternative modernities are happening everywhere.

—Rose Issa

The diversity of this year’s shortlisted entrants also frequently reflects social and political concerns, such as work by CANAN, an artist whose work is informed by her position as one of the leading defenders of women’s rights in Turkey: Using the visual language of Ottoman miniatures in photography, performance and textiles, she entered a painting titled “Resistance on Istiklal Street.” Iranian artist Sahand Hesamiyan takes elemental Islamic geometric and architectonic forms and transforms them into steel sculptures such as “Nail,” which alludes to the Crucifixion.

As its legacy, the Jameel Prize is already providing “a much needed contextual dimension and bridge across the divide between the Islamic craft heritage and contemporary practice, [and] it actually complements the rapid development of contemporary art from the region,” Fancy writes. On tour the prize gives emerging and mid-career artists an international audience, as some 172,000 people attended the first three prize exhibitions. This year, for the first time, prize organizers have produced a comprehensive catalogue featuring essays by both shortlisted artists and designers as well as academic contributors.

Submissions for the prize are from both artists and designers, and it welcomes work that is not just “fine art.” This means architectural submissions, too, which, like product designs, interact with craftsmanship such as calligraphy and graphic design. This is especially important as Islamic craft heritages are threatened in areas of conflict, by falling tourism and from competition with inexpensive manufactured alternatives to artisanal works.

By engaging in media such as carpets, metalwork and inlaid marquetry, for example, today’s artists give work to traditional craftspeople, encouraging the survival and evolution of those skills. Indeed, the 2013 prize highlighted fashion when the Turkish label Dice Kayek drew on Ottoman sartorial style for its winning entry, “Istanbul Contrast.”

With this inclusive approach, the Jameel Prize, says Venetia Porter of the British Museum, “stands as a testament to artists and designers who, in a myriad of subtle ways, encourage us to look at the world from another angle — a place where politics take second place to human aspiration and creativity.” A place where always there is more than one story. 🌐



Originally trained as a photographer, **Juliet Highet** lived in East and West Africa as well as India, subsequently also traveling to 53 countries, some many times. In Nigeria she began writing professionally and on her return to the UK began editing books and magazines. Now, as a writer and photographer, she is widely published on travel, the arts, perfumery and more. She is the author of *Frankincense: Oman’s Gift to the World* (Prestel, 2006) and a specialist in contemporary Arab cultures and heritage.

For Further Reading:
Jameel Prize 4. 2016, Pera Müzesi. 9 786054 642595. (www.artshop.peramuzesi.org.tr/)

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EPIC NATION



DOES A LEGEND MAKE A FILM OR DOES A FILM MAKE A LEGEND?



WRITTEN BY **ALIA YUNIS**

This was one of the questions I often asked myself as I followed the path of the film *Kurmanjan Dakta: Queen of the Mountains* and its historical heroine over one partly snowy, partly sweltering week in April across the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan.

Born in 1811, Kurmanjan became *datka* ("righteous governor") of several tribes in the Alai and Pamir mountain regions in 1865, a title she held until her death at age 97. She worked tirelessly to unite the region's more than two dozen tribes amid regional and colonial threats that often set one against another. (See sidebar, page 24.)

At the heart of the film, which runs a bit over two hours, is a layered love story. On the one hand, Kurmanjan Datka fulfills the dream of intertribal unity promoted also by Alymbek, her second husband and predecessor as datka. On the other, it is a paean to Kyrgyzstan itself, a young nation formed in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The film's panoramas hint at why Kyrgyz culture abounds with stories as epic as the land itself.

Released in 2014, *Queen of the Mountains* ran on three out of four Kyrgyz theater screens in its first month, and it kept running in many for up to six months, setting box-office records and becoming the highest-grossing Kyrgyz film to date. In 2014 Kyrgyzstan submitted the film for Oscar consideration. With a budget of about $1.5 million, it was also the most expensive film made to date in the country and the first to receive substantial government arts support.

In part due to a national reexamination of history following the Soviet era, Kurmanjan Datka's historical story "became much more popular and relevant, but until recently it was not raised to the level of popularity that we had after the film," says Elmira Kuchumkulova, professor of heritage and literature at the University of Central Asia in Bishkek, the capital. Like many, she went to see the film when it opened on Kyrgyzstan's independence day, August 31. "Many people looked forward to it because they read about her in history textbooks, but they did not have a clear picture of her."

The success has kept its director, Sadyk Sher-Niyaz, busy writing new scripts—in his spare time. A former minister of culture recently elected to parliament, Sher-Niyaz has an office in the White House, Kyrgyzstan's seat of government in Bishkek. A career politician, he laughs and jokes fluidly the day we meet, whether it's talking about politics or the film that consumed more than three years of his life. Working with co-writer Bakytbek Turdubaev, formerly of Al Jazeera, Sher-Niyaz notes that with all its vast scenes, the film required "around 10,000" people, "mostly as extras," he says. "Doctors, teachers, a lot of theater people. It was a national collaboration."

The idea for the film originated with another parliament member, and Sher-Niyaz was a natural to direct it: In 2007,





Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains, directed by Sadyk Sher-Niyaz, *center,* stars Elina Abai Kyzy, who portrays the early years of the historical 19th-century heroine remembered today as *ulut enesi*—mother of the nation. *Opposite, lower:* One of the only photographs of Kurmanjan Datka was made by Finnish Colonel Carl Gustaf Mannerheim in 1906, when she was about 95.

ABOVE (2) AND OPPOSITE, MAIN: AITYSH FILM; OPPOSITE, LOWER: C. G. MANNERHEIM / MUSEUM INITIATIVES CENTER

aged 38, he had left his post as a deputy judge to study film in Moscow, a dream he had been unable to pursue as a struggling young father in the immediate post-Soviet era.

The film he made is reminiscent of classic American westerns, but replete with Central Asian culture and a female lead. Otherwise, the heroes (and especially the heroine) are selfless, the villains are conniving, the battles are drawn out for drama, and the horse chases switch into slow motion. Warring parties meet; landscapes dazzle and sweep. Like westerns, it's a film that defines a history and builds a national narrative.

I ask Sher-Niyaz if American westerns inspired him. He professes the film he admires most is Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*, the gritty 2006 adventure set in coastal Mexico on the eve of Spanish colonialism. "He decided to shoot a historical film, which is very hard. You have to find out how they lived, how they ate, and so on. But Mel Gibson just decided how it was. And I respect that. I thought if Mel Gibson thought that, I also can decide how our people lived 200 years ago, no problem," he explains.

If anything, this actually has been the film's main problem. While in broad strokes *Queen of the Mountains* is accurate, in specifics it falls short now and then, according to historians. "Sadyk is a good, good man. But it is very important to us, part of us revising history, to be accurate," says Tynchtykbek Chorotegin, the country's leading national historian and a professor at the Kyrgyz National University.

He says that although he and others were invited to see the rough cut, it was too late for comments to take effect. Chorotegin notes that in some scenes, characters who were long dead in real history suddenly show up; in others, events that were not part of the culture take place. For example, a woman is saved from being stoned to death: This, he contends, is not a Kyrgyz tradition. "If a woman was unfaithful to her husband, their tribes would go to war, but the woman would not be stoned," he says. "This is just silly."

Just as silly, he points out, is Kurmanjan Datka writing a love letter in runic script. "The runic script was used by ethnic groups in some places until the 12th century," he continues. "In the film, she was writing in [the] 1830s."

WITH ITS VAST SCENES REQUIRING SOME 10,000 EXTRAS, "IT WAS A NATIONAL COLLABORATION."

But as this is all new history for Kyrgyzstan, few know the difference, and many who do regard the flaws as minor. The Kyrgyz are historically nomadic and have thus relied primarily on oral history for centuries and, among educated elites, Arabic script was still very much in use as recently as the late 1920s—well after Kyrgyzstan had been incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Proof of this becomes tangible in the village of Gulcha, 2,400 meters up the still-snowy Chyrchyk Pass from Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, Osh. Gulcha was Kurmanjan Datka's headquarters, the de facto capital of the Alai region she ruled. Sher-Niyaz says nearly everyone in Gulcha took part in the filming.

For many of them, it was a deeply personal experience. Of the more than 1,500 people in Kyrgyzstan who are considered to be descendants of the Alai queen, some 300 live in Gulcha. In 1991 Gulcha opened the Kurmanjan Datka Museum of History and Ethnography, a yurt-shaped building on the outskirts of the village that announces itself with a huge statue of Kurmanjan Datka.

Twenty-five students of tourism have just arrived from Bishkek, and they are being shown about by museum



The film premiered internationally at the 2014 Montreal World Film Festival, where industry insiders and critics alike complimented its costumes and, as *The Montreal Gazette* noted, the "lush cinematography of the country's mountainous landscape," which appears here as a backdrop in a re-creation of a Kyrgyz tribal encampment.

Awaiting cues on location are co-stars Mirlan Abdylaev, center, who plays Kurmanjan's younger brother, and Gulnur Asanova, right, who plays Asel, wife of Kurmanjan's ill-fated son, Kamchybek. Asanova wears a traditional Kyrgyz headpiece called *elechek,* a rolled white cloth up to 30 meters long that could be used to wrap a woman's body should she not survive a journey.



AITYSH FILM (2)

director Bazargul Koionbaeva, who, like the museum's other five employees, is a descendant of the datka. As with politics and history, film works well with tourism, and the students are here to survey what their country has to offer. But it is hard to get here: Gulcha is a two-hour drive from Osh over precarious mountain passes and 12 hours from Bishkek. Before the film, the museum would have been little considered as a sightseeing destination.

Through gold teeth—a common feature of smiles here—Koionbaeva points out a letter penned by Kurmanjan Datka herself, in which her words in Kyrgyz use Arabic script. Koionbaeva refers to her as "our mother," an endearing sentiment shared widely among Kyrgyz.

"We get about 15 to 30 visitors a day," she says. "Since the film came out, we have gotten more visitors, even from other countries, especially representatives of NGOs dealing with cultural heritage."

Most of the museum displays show traditional Kyrgyz clothes, weapons and utensils. But this is also one of the rare places you can see one of the only photographs ever taken of Kurmanjan Datka. Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, a Finnish member of the Russian army who later became Finland's president, captured a handful of images at the end of her life.

A former history teacher, Koionbaeva also points out a rope: Donated by a family member, it is said to be the real instrument by which the Russians had hanged Kamchybek, Kurmanjan Datka's son accused of killing the Russian soldiers who had disgraced his wife by cutting off her hair in search of a key to a box he refused to open. This set up the critical moment of Kurmanjan's legacy: If she had stopped the execution, Kyrgyz widely believe the Russians would have utterly destroyed them; Kurmanjan's sacrifice allowed her to negotiate autonomy that held the tribes together, and this is viewed today as the seed of nationhood.

"I like working here," Koionbaeva says. "Her spirit is still somewhere here helping people."



Leaving Gulcha back to Osh, driver Dinara, translator Alina and I stop in a seemingly nameless village in the municipality of Mady. Dinara is pretty sure that somewhere in this area is a village named Kurmanjan Datka. There are no signs; streets are empty. We walk past a Soviet statue into the mostly deserted municipality building. We find Jumagul Esenova, Mady's deputy head of social affairs, hunched over paperwork, as surprised to see us as we are to see her. She explains that we are in the right place: The village isn't officially called Kurmanjan Datka, but that's what the locals have started calling it since it let go of its Soviet name, Frunze Collective Farm.



KURMANJAN

was born in 1811 outside present-day Osh, Kyrgyzstan. During her 97 years of life, she united Kyrgyz tribes against Chinese, Russian and other Central Asian powers, commanded an army and negotiated the continued integrity of her nation. She became the first female leader to be recognized by the Tsar of Russia, the Emir of Bukhara and the Khan of Kokand. Since independence in 1991 and the bicentennial of her birth in 2011, she is remembered not only as a *datka* (righteous governor) but also as Queen of the Alai, Queen of the South and, most of all, *ulut enesi*—mother—of the Kyrgyz nation.

Four actresses, each of a different age, play Kurmanjan: Last is Zhamal Seydakhmatova, *above*, whose acting career in Kyrgyz films spans seven decades. *Opposite*: Governor-General of Russian Turkestan Konstantin Kaufman's expansion of Russian colonial power into the Alai Valley inspired resistance from Kyrgyz tribes under Kurmanjan; he is played by Victor Kostetskiy, a Russian actor with more than 100 credits to his name when he passed away months after the film's release.

Esenova's husband is descended from Kurmanjan Datka, and she makes sure her own children know their lineage. She adds that every May Kurmanjan Datka's descendants gather to celebrate her life with prayers, readings from the Qur'an and the breaking of seven loaves of bread, a local tradition.

"Kurmanjan Datka's spirit has always helped the village," she says. "The collective farm was run mostly by women, and it was always highly praised by the Soviets and won three big awards. Now the women are very active in local government."





Esenova herself transitioned from being one of the leaders of the collective farm to local government. When asked about the film, she observes that "the one thing we didn't like is that she was shown more as a warrior than as a woman. Our forefathers told us that she was very feminine, famous for her care and tenderness, for her cheerful personality. In the film, she didn't talk much and behaved more like a man."

According to international trade reviews of the film written when it debuted with subtitles at the Montreal World Film Festival in August 2014 and later in other venues abroad, it may not be so much whether the datka is too masculine or feminine, but rather that she is a bit flat. This isn't a character-driven movie. The director is keener to talk about his intent to show as many elements of Kyrgyz culture as possible.

In this he has been successful. The cinematographer, Murat Aliyev, trained in Moscow and has been shooting films since 1966. "It was important to show the beauty of the country," he says, chatting back in Bishkek at Sher-Niyaz's production office, Aitysh Film. (The name refers to the art of improvised oral poetry.)

This also included filming a tiger, borrowed from the Moscow Zoo, amid nature, so it could appear each time Kurmanjan Datka has to summon strength.

AITYSH FILM (2)

Opposite: Threatened by the gathering power of Kyrgyz tribes to the east, Kudayar, the Khan of Kokand, played by veteran stage actor Jenish Smanov, ordered the assassination of Kurmanjan's husband and predecessor, Alymbek Datka. Kurmanjan then determined to fulfill his vision of Kyrgyz unification. *Lower:* Today she is remembered most of all for her assent in 1895 when Russian forces hanged her youngest son, Kamchybek, played by 25-year-old Adilet Usubaliyev. The heartbreaking sacrifice prevented what likely would have become the Russian annihilation of the Kyrgyz.



One among the datka's 1,500 descendants, Bazargul Koionbaeva directs the Kurmanjan Datka Museum of History and Ethnography in Gulcha, where images of Kurmanjan appear on the walls and cases display artifacts associated with her legacy. "Since the film came out, we have gotten more visitors, even from other countries," she says.



"The tiger symbolizes freedom and courage. It's good to show this woman as a tiger," says Chorotegin. "In Kyrgyz culture, they might dream of tigers or lions. The Kyrgyz people—some of the tribes—think they are descendants of tigers. We are a nation of 40 tribes, and each tribe belongs to an animal, like one is the deer, the wolf, the bear."

Kyrgyzstan is about the size of England, Wales and Scotland combined, but with a population of only 5.8 million, the whole country can feel like a small town. That's how, on another day, we're not surprised when we stop at a restaurant for lunch and the rambunctious group of young men and women at the next table includes an assistant cameraman on the film. Conversation follows.

"This film shows that our ancestors were strong," says one of the women. "It shows our true values, like faith, dignity, honesty. Not the things young people are interested in nowadays unfortunately."

But when asked to name their favorite Kyrgyz films, they tick off others: *The White Ship, Red Apple* and other films made in the 1970s and 1980s, an era of cinema now called "The Kyrgyz Miracle."

"THIS FILM SHOWS THAT OUR ANCESTORS WERE STRONG. IT SHOWS OUR TRUE VALUES, LIKE FAITH, DIGNITY, HONESTY."

Unlike the other Central Asian republics, the Soviets invested considerably in Kyrgyzstan's film industry. It was the Soviets who in 1936 built Aitysh Film, and now Sher-Niyaz also rents it out to other filmmakers.

"We're a complete studio, except that we cannot do Dolby Sound," he says. "World figures in cinema like the late Michelangelo Antonioni once walked here. And of course, Aitmatov. It's a sacred place for me."

He refers to Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008). This is also a country where the most famous person in its modern, post-Kurmanjan Datka history is a novelist. Aitmatov is commemorated in images everywhere, and he comes up in conversations routinely.

"Aitmatov is the reason the Soviets invested in film here," says Kiyas Moldokasymov, the country's oldest film historian. The author's works were international successes, and they garnered attention on a global scale through film adaptations that won prizes around the world. "That's why it was called The Kyrgyz Miracle," Moldokasymov explains. "The Soviets gave a lot of money, and so many Kyrgyz trained in Moscow."

Today that legacy of talent is also much employed in the country's more prosperous neighbor and frequent rival Kazakhstan. Aliyev estimates half of Kazakhstan's films are shot by Kyrgyz cameramen.

Moldokasymov reckons that about 10 to 15 local films a year are released annually, all with privately funded budgets "around $30,000." Most are aimed at young people because, the film critic reasons, "people want to see themselves. So these are comedies, love stories and rural life stories in which youngsters can laugh at themselves."

"If the government could fund one film every two years, that would be good," Moldokasymov says. "We don't have much money."

Kurmanjan Datka's $1.5 million budget was about a tenth of the cost of Kazakhstan's most famous national film, the 2005 *Nomad*. "No one makes money on quality films here," says Sher-Niyaz. "The actors were given $20 a day.... We can live on $200 a month here, so you could live on this salary if there was always work.

"An epic film on our budget," he marvels. "That is something."

TOP AND OPPOSITE, TOP: ALIA YUNIS; OPPOSITE, LOWER: KUBAN KEMELOV



Located in Kurmanjan's home area of Gulcha, near Osh, the second-largest city in Kyrgyzstan, the Kurmanjan Datka Museum of History and Ethnography is shaped like a traditional nomadic yurt. *Lower:* In Kyrgyzstan, theaters such as the Ala-Too in Bishkek, the capital, serve not only for leisure entertainment but also as a modern continuation of a culture long defined by epic oral narratives.

Kyrgyz use the word "epic" frequently, and not in the casual sense that young people do in English these days. Because the epic poem is the leading national historical art form—the most famous is the epic of Manas, more than 1,000 years old and comprised of more than half a million lines—the culture of poetic song opens *Kurmanjan Datka* and recurs often, and even the datka herself was also an *agyn*, or master poet-singer.

"Using epic songs and poems was an integral part of nation-building after the Soviet collapse," says heritage and literature professor Kuchumkulova.

Kurmanjan Datka's own epic of 97 years ends in an 11th-century cemetery in Osh. In 2010 her husband's memorial was moved alongside hers. I learn this from Mahmud *aka* (elder brother Mahmud), who is among the second generation in his family to guard the cemetery. Although it is primarily an Uzbek graveyard, Mahmud aka, who is Uzbek, says Kurmanjan Datka asked to be buried near the biggest mosque in the area, which was here at the time. More than 20 ethnic groups live in the Osh district, situated in Central Asia's Fergana Valley, where Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan meet. There have always been tensions and clashes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, but Mahmud aka likes the film too, insisting that because the modern borders are not exact, Kurmanjan Datka's story belongs, to everyone, including Kyrgyzstan's neighbors.

At one of our last stops, we are in the town of Cholpan Ata. We find several schoolgirls gathered outside a dilapidated cinema. They've been sent by their teacher to watch last year's *Zar Zaman* (Desperate Times), about the Youth Revolution of April 2010, when people took to the streets of Bishkek to protest government corruption. They've seen *Kurmanjan Datka*—of course—and now they're looking forward to studying her. The seats in the theater are falling apart, and the screen dates to the 1960s, but for their generation, this is where legends and history make and remake each other. 🌐



Alia Yunis (www.aliayunis.com) is a filmmaker and author based in Abu Dhabi. She's currently editing *The Golden Harvest,* a film about how olive oil shaped the Mediterranean (www.goldenharvestfilm.org).

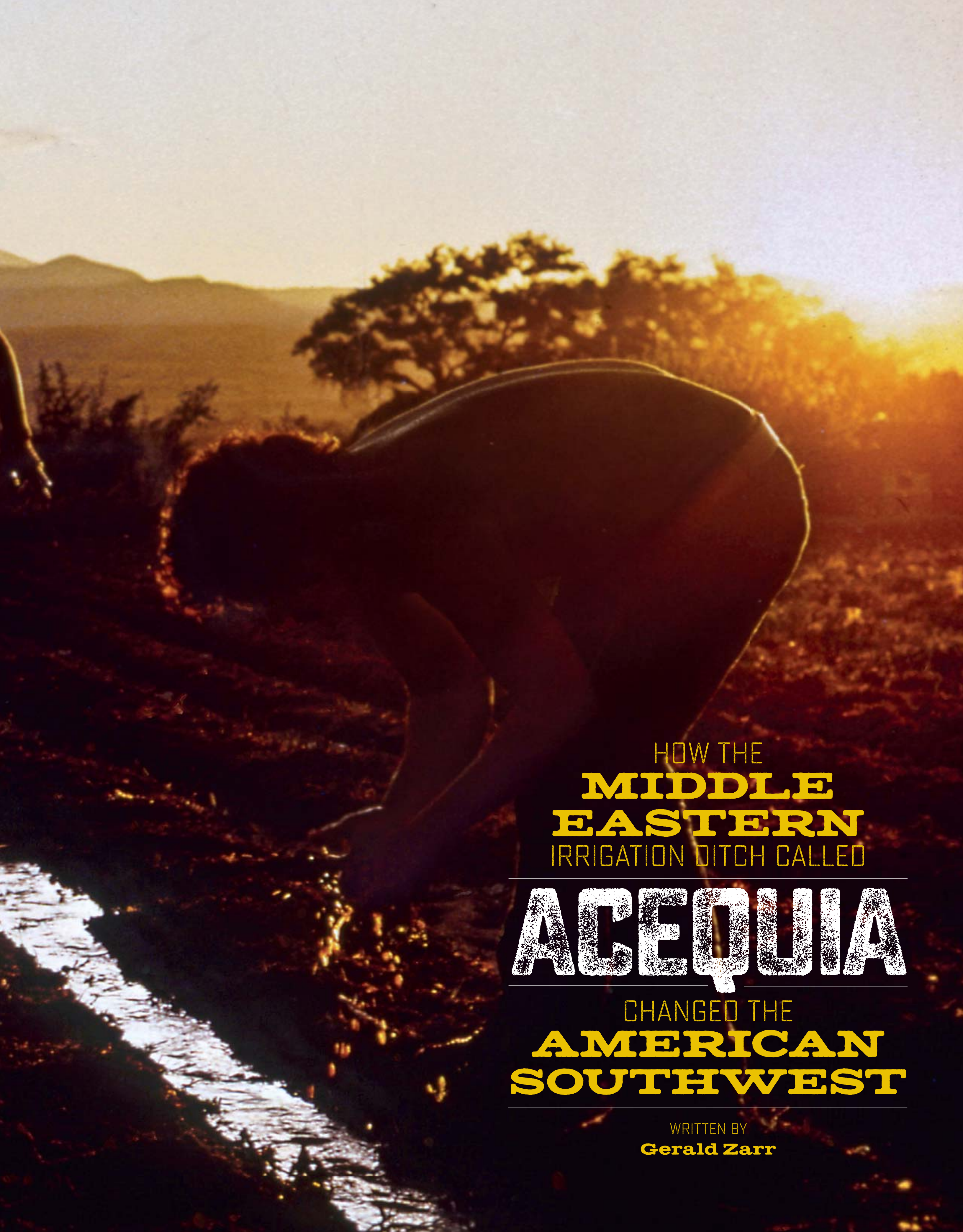
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View trailer







HOW THE MIDDLE EASTERN IRRIGATION DITCH CALLED ACEQUIA CHANGED THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

WRITTEN BY
Gerald Zarr

JOE MONDRAGÓN "TUGGED ON HIS IRRIGATION BOOTS, FLUNG A SHOVEL INTO HIS PICKUP AND ... OPENED THE ROYBAL DITCH HEADGATE," DIVERTING WATER FROM INDIAN CREEK INTO HIS PARENTS' OLD BEAN FIELD IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO—SPARKING A PITCHED BATTLE BETWEEN FARMERS WITH DEEP TIES TO THE LAND AND NEWLY ARRIVED DEVELOPERS BENT ON BIG BUCKS.



So goes the pivotal moment in the popular 1974 novel by John Nichols that in 1988 Robert Redford made into a movie, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, set in a fictional small town called Milagro ("Miracle"). What's real in the tale is the ditch: It's an *acequia*, an irrigation system upon which the Mondragón family farm depends and whose technology and methods of community water distribution go back all the way to early civilizations in the Middle East, specifically to al-Andalus, Muslim Spain. Indeed, during a week spent in New Mexico to report on its acequia heritage, I found myself imagining what it would be like to wear Mondragón's boots.

When I told people at home in Washington, D.C., that I was going to New Mexico to investigate acequias, I had to spell out the word and pronounce it slowly, "ah-SIH-kee-ah." No one knew what I was talking about. At the other extreme was the innkeeper at the Dreamcatcher B&B in Taos, New Mexico, who informed me without missing a beat, "There's an acequia right behind your room" and then took me out for a view. The one immutable truth I learned is that there's no middle ground when it comes to acequias: People either have no idea what you're talking about or they're passionate about them.

Derived from the Arabic *as-saqiya* ("that which gives water"), acequias are gravity-flow irrigation ditches that evolved over 10,000 years in the arid regions of the Middle East. Especially from the ninth through the 16th century, control of the movement of water—hydrology—was one of the most important technologies developed from Mesopotamia and Persia to Arabia, North Africa and Spain. When the Spanish colonized the New World, they brought with them their acequia technology. (Acequias have subterranean cousins from the same regions, known variously as *qanat*s or *falaj*s.)

My own visit to New Mexico started in Albuquerque with a tutorial on acequias in bravura style by José A. Rivera of the University of New Mexico and author in 1998 of *Acequia Culture: Water, Land and Community in the Southwest*. Acequias, he explained, have not just history, but also culture, governance and issues of sustainability. He pointed me to the nearby Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, where a recent exhibit featured artworks and 130 objects relating to digging and maintaining the waterways.

One painting in the exhibition showed water from an acequia seeping through the ground to recharge the aquifer below. Other exhibits included a wooden headgate to open and shut the acequia's flow (perhaps of a type Nichols had imagined for Mondragón); a pair of overalls and rubber boots worn by a *mayordomo*, or water master; and the rusted back end of an early 1950s Dodge pickup, displayed as a typical mode of transportation to and from acequias. A bumper sticker proclaimed, "Our Acequias: Life, Culture, Tradition"—fighting words in a region where it's not just *The Milagro Beanfield War* but real communities, government authorities and property developers that are cooperating and contesting the water rights that mean the difference between feast and famine, endurance and eviction.

Three days later I was driving north out of Santa Fe following the Rio Grande through the Espanola Valley on New Mexico State Road 68, also known as the "River Road to Taos." Soon I was in real "Milagro Beanfield" territory, for the film was shot at Truchas, just 30 kilometers east. This road began as the northern leg of the *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* (Royal Road to the Interior Lands), Spain's 2,400-kilometer route of conquest from Mexico City that reached north to Taos. On this road in July 1598, Capitan General Don Juan de Oñate brought the first Spanish settlers to New Mexico and established one of the earliest European settlements in what is now the United States.

Four hundred colonists and soldiers, and several hundred Indians from what is now Mexico, came with 83 creaking wagons, 1,000 horses and 7,000 head of livestock in a procession six kilometers long that moved as fast as the cattle walked. Oñate settled his headquarters about 50 kilometers north of present-day Santa Fe in a town he called San Gabriel (today's Chamita). Water was so essential he ordered construction of acequias even before the town's houses, public buildings and churches were finished. It was easy to understand why: Settlers were carrying buckets of water hanging from yokes across their shoulders. In *Acequia Culture*, Rivera described how the settlers diverted water on one of the mightiest stretches of the Rio Grande and built an acequia:

> [They built] dams made of logs, brush, rocks and other natural materials.... Using wooden hand tools, the digging of earthen ditches and laterals would follow the



Opposite: Members of the acequia community in New Mexico's Embudo Valley near Dixon clear debris from an irrigation canal in the annual "spring cleaning," supervised by *mayordomo* (water master) Mark Olivas, *right. Left*: This fall portrait of an *acequia madre* (main canal) in the South Valley of Albuquerque highlights its scenic, as well as engineering, beauty. *Preceding spread:* In a view that could have come straight out of *The Milagro Beanfield War,* Manuel and Leroy López prepare to transplant chile seedlings in their family's acequia-watered farm near Santa Cruz.

> construction of the main diversion dam…. [T]hese irrigation works included … the *acequia madre* (mother ditch or main canal), *compuertas* (headgates), *canoas* (log flumes for arroyo crossings), *sangrias* (lateral ditches cut perpendicular from the main canal to irrigate individual parcels of land) and a *desague* channel, which drains surplus water back to the stream source.

The acequia network channeled the swollen flow of springtime mountain snowmelt into community fields and gardens that blossomed with jalapeño peppers, blue corn, squash, lettuce, cabbage, peas, garbanzos, cumin seed, carrots, turnips, garlic, onions, artichokes, radishes and cucumbers. More than 400 years later, these same crops are grown in the Espanola Valley, some still watered by acequias.

DONATELLA DAVANZO (4); PRECEDING SPREAD: ALEJANDRO LÓPEZ

La Jornada, the journey of the first Spanish settlers through the region in the late 16th century, is commemorated in statues at the Albuquerque Museum. Today's "River Road to Taos" follows their route up the Rio Grande north from Santa Fe through the Espanola Valley. *Right*: Each year, the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA) holds its Congreso de las Acequias, where delegates from around the state elect a governing council and pass resolutions aimed at "protecting our land and water resources for future generations of acequia farmers and ranchers," according to the NMAA's website.

In 1610 Oñate's successor, Pedro de Peralta, moved the capital to Santa Fe. Once again, building acequias was the first order of business. On each side of the Santa Fe River, an acequia madre was dug, and eventually dozens of acequias sustained the growing population. Today, although the city's acequias no longer serve primarily for agriculture, they are a treasured part of the urban scene: One of Santa Fe's prettiest streets is the narrow, winding street named Acequia Madre.

In following years, acequias were built also across much of the Southwest in lands that became Texas, Colorado, Arizona and California, but it is in New Mexico that the system proved most durable. Today New Mexico boasts some 800 active acequias, all survivors of political, legal and administrative changes through the Spanish (1598-1821), Mexican (1821-1848) and Territorial (1848-1912) periods, as well as US statehood, to the present day. After New Mexico, Colorado comes next with an estimated 150 active acequias in the four southern counties of Costilla, Conejos, Huerfano and Las Animas.

By contrast, in the other states, most colonial-era acequias were abandoned or supplanted by private mutual ditch companies, water-user associations, irrigation districts or conservancy districts. Few remain in Arizona, California and Texas—although San Antonio has preserved one near Espada Dam southeast of the city.

Rivera explained that the word "acequia" refers not only to the physical trench in the ground, but also, and just as importantly, to the system of community self-governance. "You don't just *have* a ditch; you *belong to* an acequia," he explains, emphasizing that the word also means the co-op of farmers who





share the water and govern their own use of it. So important are the organizations that the state of New Mexico recognizes acequias as political subdivisions.

The acequia elects its own mayordomo, whose role has antecedents in the Moorish *sahib al-saqiya*, or "water giver," who assesses how much water is available daily and prescribes times for each farmer to water his crops.

Acequia water law also requires that persons with irrigation rights in the acequia participate in an annual, springtime ditch cleanup. This is when, all along the upper Rio Grande, the sound of rakes and shovels brings a bustle to largely tranquil hills, as members scoop and scrape whatever has settled in the ditch over the winter. "It's a tradition," says Rivera. "The annual cleanup bonds the community."

The renewed flow of water that followed the work marked a festive time. "Kids would run ahead … yelling, 'the water is coming!'" wrote New Mexico historian and former mayordomo Juan Estevan Arellano in *Enduring Acequias: Wisdom of the Land, Knowledge of the Water*, published just before his death in 2014.

Arellano spent much of his life as an acequias advocate. In his book he took the reader to his farm at the confluence of the Embudo and Río Grande Rivers, about halfway between Santa Fe and Taos on the Camino Real, which had been in his family since 1725. He wrote that he lived on "a combination experimental farm and recreational site that I call my *almunyah,* from the classical Arabic word meaning 'desire.'

"There is nothing more coveted in a property than to have an acequia run close to the house," he wrote, citing the 1348 *Treatise on Agriculture* by the polymath writer Ibn Luyun of Almeria, then part of al-Andalus. The acequia "has a soothing effect and provides for a very tranquil sleep." Arellano asserted that acequias were "more democratic than any other institution," because "they share water to the last drop." He elaborated:

> This concept, called *equidad*, or equality, comes directly from the Qur'an. Under Muslim law, possibly because it evolved in the desert, people must never deny water to another being. This is called the Law of Thirst [*haq-i-shurb*]. To portion water out to other beings, including animals and plants, is considered a *zakat* or pious charity. This concept has been practiced in northern New Mexico forever. I am told that my grandfather always had a trough full of water for travelers and their animals. Our people never thought of selling water.





This modern concrete acequia headgate controls the flow of water into fields through multiple "doors." The local mayordomo decides how to share the water channeled from rivers and streams.

In New Mexico acequia water was historically treated as a community resource that irrigators had a shared right to use and a shared responsibility to manage and protect. With statehood, however, came the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation. Based on the principle that water rights are not connected to land ownership, it meant that water—from any source—could be sold or mortgaged like other property. This gave rise to the populist Southwest adage, "water flows uphill to money"—or, more simply, water ends up being owned by the rich and powerful.

G. Emlen Hall, author in 2002 of *High and Dry: The Texas-New Mexico Struggle for the Pecos River*, explains that real-estate developers often try to secure water rights for new projects by buying irrigated land served by acequias. Then, he says, they try—often against local opposition—to transfer those rights to new, distant developments. "This, of course, would have picked the acequias apart, tract by tract, and eventually destroyed them," he notes, "These battles over water are continuing, and they can be intense."

Rivera agrees. "One water transfer at a time erodes the function of a community ditch. Eventually there is a tipping point if too much water is taken out of the ditch," he says. "Beyond the tipping-point threshold, reached after many such sales and transfers, the acequia institution and governance collapse."

Starting in the late 1980s, there was a burst of "acequia activism" in New Mexico that culminated in 1988 with the

establishment of the statewide New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA) and, around the same time, farmers formed regional acequia associations. In a major legislative victory for the groups, the New Mexico Legislature enacted a law in 2003 allowing acequias to block water transfers outside the physical acequia if detrimental to it or its members.

Although some developers disparage acequias as water-guzzlers, the claims are disproved by recent research. Studies by hydrologist Alexander "Sam" Fernald, professor of watershed management at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, show that traditional earthen irrigation ditches offer hydrologic benefits beyond simply delivering water to crops.

His data show that, on average, only seven percent of the water diverted from the Rio Grande into a north-central New Mexico acequia is lost to evapo-transpiration—the sum of evaporation from all sources, including water vapor released by plants. The remaining 93 percent returns to the river, 60 percent as surface water from irrigation tailwater and 33 percent as groundwater. Acequias also help build healthy aquifers by filtering the water that percolates underground: Aquifers are key sources of drinking water. Furthermore, they benefit livestock, which can drink directly from acequias rather than going to the river. "Most people are unaware of these positive effects of acequias," says Fernald.

About 15 kilometers north of Taos, Sylvia Rodriguez lives in a *casita* ("small house") in the acequia community of Valdez. She is emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of New Mexico and author in 2006 of *Acequia: Water Sharing, Sanctity and Place*.

In September 2014 she joined 23 other delegates from the NMAA in Valencia, Spain, where they attended the signing of a *Hermanamiento (*Act of Brotherhood) linking the acequia institutions of Spain and New Mexico, as well as the presentation of a Medal of Honor by the *Tribunal de las Aguas de la Vega de Valencia* (Water Court of the Plain of Valencia) to the NMAA "for maintaining and defending the life, culture and tradition of our acequias for over 400 years."

The day after the delegation arrived, several hundred spectators gathered for the weekly meeting of the tribunal that has been deciding cases outside the Cathedral of Valencia at noon on Thursday since Moorish times—when the great Mosque of Valencia stood near the same spot. The court is comprised of eight *Hombres Buenos* ("good men"), farmers elected every two years to represent their fellow irrigators of the *huerta*s, the vast, fertile floodplains steeped in history that remain crisscrossed with acequias.

Valencia was "enormously affirming," notes Rodriguez. "Spain is both the historic and symbolic source for New Mexico's acequia tradition. Even though the tribunal is older and more elaborate than our method of dispute settlement, the principles are the same."

Delegates also took a bicycle tour of the huerta. That "was important for me personally, to see the landscape (*paisaje de l'agua*), the acequias and the elaborate system of houses and head-gate mechanisms," Rodriguez wrote. "The challenges and struggles Spanish acequias face—urban and real-estate development, demographic change, drought and climate change—are essentially the same ones we face. This means that we are not alone." ⊕



A thirsty garlic crop soaks up water near Santa Cruz. New Mexico boasts some 800 working acequias, the largest number among the five southwestern states where the irrigation systems are found.



An acequia unique in the US stands near Espada Dam, southeast of San Antonio, Texas. Water once vital to fields in the area still flows over a slash in the hillside called Sixmile Creek via an aqueduct completed in the mid-1700s.

TOP: ALEJANDRO LÓPEZ; LOWER: ARTHUR P. CLARK; OPPOSITE: DONATELLA DAVANZO



Gerald Zarr (jzarr@aol.com) is a writer, lecturer and development consultant who lived and worked overseas as a US Foreign Service officer for more than 20 years. He is the author of a cultural guidebook on Tunisia and numerous articles on the history and culture of the Middle East.



Anthropologist and photographer **Donatella Davanzo** is a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico who specializes in acequia cultures and systems as well as Southwestern Native cultures and Route 66. She lives in Albuquerque.

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IV

MALIKA

ملكة

HÜRREM SULTAN (ROXOLANA)

Written by TOM VERDE
Art by LEONOR SOLANS

From Bangladesh to Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan to Nigeria, Senegal to Turkey, it is not particularly rare in our own times for women in Muslim-majority countries to be appointed and elected to high offices—including heads of state. Nor has it ever been.

During a period stretching back more than 14 centuries to the advent of Islam, women have held positions among many ruling elites, from *malika*s, or queens, to powerful advisors. Some ascended to rule in their own right; others rose as regents for incapacitated husbands or male successors yet too young for a throne. Some proved insightful administrators, courageous military commanders, or both; others differed little from equally flawed, power-seeking male potentates, and they sowed the seeds of their own downfalls.

This series presents some of the most notable historical female leaders of Muslim dynasties, empires and caliphates.

Our fourth story comes from the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople.



The reign of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I ("the Magnificent"), from 1520 to 1566, was the empire's golden age. Equally impressive was the century and a half that followed, the *Kadınlar Saltanatı*, or the "Sultanate of Women." During this era, a succession of politically savvy royal women directed much of the government's affairs, often as regents for underage male sultans. First among them was a woman who came to the palace as a slave and eventually played a role in foreign and domestic affairs and served as an intimate political advisor to the sultan.

Europeans knew her as Roxolana, meaning "a girl from Roxolania," the medieval Latin name for the Ukraine. Her Ottoman name was *Haseki Hürrem Sultan*, from *haseki* (favored wife or royal consort) and *hürrem*, meaning "joyful" or "laughing one." According to legend, she was born Anastasia (or Aleksandra) Lisowska, around 1505 in western Ukraine. Abducted by Crimean slavers at age 15, she arrived in Constantinople (today's Istanbul) where she was supposedly purchased by Ibrahim Pasha as a gift for his boyhood friend and soon-to-be-sultan Suleiman.

Others say Roxolana was assigned first to the royal laundry, where her skills as an embroiderer were matched only by her musicianship. As the story goes, Suleiman was passing by the laundry when he overheard her singing and playing Ukrainian songs. Stumblingly conversant in Slavic, the sultan "stopped to talk with her in her outlandish speech,"and was immediately smitten, as his 1951 biographer Harold Lamb recounted.

While smacking of fairy tale, the story suggests it was Roxolana's wit and intelligence that made her stand out. Indeed, Venetian ambassador Pietro Bragadin described Roxolana as "young but not beautiful, although graceful and petite."

Once Suleiman officially noticed Roxolana (laying a handkerchief across her shoulder was the court custom), she became the third most powerful woman in the palace after Suleiman's mother, Hafsa, the *valide sultan*, or "queen mother," and his *qadin sultan*, or first lady, Mahidevran, mother of Suleiman's eldest son, Mustafa.

Clashes with Mahidevran were swift in coming. By 1526 the Venetian ambassadors—meticulous observers of court politics and intrigues—had noted that Suleiman favored Roxolana. Envoy Bernardo Navagero wrote that Mahidevran confronted her, shouting, "Traitor, sold meat [i.e., "bought in the bazaar"]. You want to compete with me?" as she clawed Roxolana with her nails. Later summoned, Roxolana sent word to Suleiman that she was not presentable. Baffled, he demanded to see her. She "related to him what had happened ... showing her face, which still bore the scratches." Mahidevran confessed, adding brassily that "she had done less to [Roxolana] than she deserved." This "inflamed the sultan even more," and "all his love was given to the other"—Roxolana.

Wits and devotion led her to power and precedent.

The episode underscores Roxolana's talent for navigating palace politics. Although not an official *qadin*—a title that would remain with Mahidevran as mother of Mustafa—as Suleiman's favorite it was soon apparent that Roxolana was done playing by old rules, with Suleiman's blessing.

She started by defying the harem's century-old "one mother-one son" policy, preventing a royal consort from bearing more than one heir. Between 1521 and 1531, she had a son, Mehmed; a daughter, Mihrimah; and then four more sons: Abdullah, Selim, Bayezid and Cihangir. In 1541 she defied another royal tradition by remaining in Constantinople rather than accompanying Mehmed to his first administrative post in the provinces. (Normally, only upon the sultan's death would the mother of the eldest male heir be permitted to return to the capital, where she would then assume the role of *valide sultan*.) She shattered another, far greater tradition by becoming the sultan's wife.

"This week there has occurred in this city a most extraordinary event, one absolutely unprecedented in the history of the Sultans," remarked one Genoese ambassador in an undated letter. "The Grand Signior Suleiman has taken to himself as his Empress a slave-woman from Russia, called Roxalana [sic], and there has been great feasting."

The wedding, in 1533 or 1534, was Suleiman's most public declaration that he was "deeply devoted" to Roxolana, wrote historian Leslie Pierce. As the Venetian Navagero observed: "There has never been a woman in the Ottoman palace who had more power than she."

The royal couple's correspondence highlights their passion.

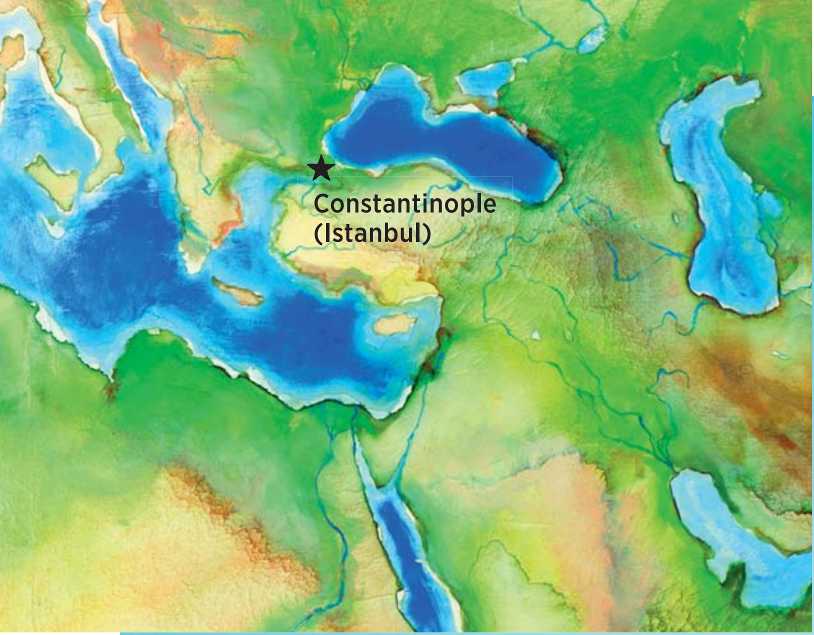
"I wish for your success," Roxolana wrote to Suleiman when he was off campaigning. "However my greatest wish is to be reunited with you. You are the only cure for my grieving, sorrowful heart."

Suleiman was equally smitten. Under the alias Muhibbi (The Affectionate One), he replied: "[M]y bright moon ... my elixir of Paradise, my Eden/I am a flatterer near your door, I'll sing your praises always/I, lover of the tormented heart, Muhibbi of the eyes full of tears, I am happy."

Suleiman's devotion was both sentimental and singular. He refused "to know any other women: something that had never been done by any of his predecessors," wrote Domenico Trevisano, another Venetian envoy, in 1554.

Nevertheless, Roxolana eliminated potential rivals by persuading Suleiman to marry off the prettiest of the young women in the harem. She also (happily, no doubt) waved goodbye to Mahidevran in 1533, when the *qadin* followed Mustafa to his first official, provincial appointment. A year later, Hafsa died, leaving Roxolana mistress of the harem, at least *pro tempore*, as Mahidevran remained rightfully next in line to become *valide sultan*.

But another rival remained: Ibrahim, now grand vizier. Though one of Suleiman's closest confidants, Ibrahim de-



veloped his own aspirations to the throne. After a decade or so of honors, wealth and ever-increasing authority, Ibrahim grew arrogant and "was much hated," ambassador Bragadin wrote. Ibrahim ran his own military campaigns and even referred to himself as "sultan" in negotiations. His fall was swift: On March 15, 1536, servants found him with his throat cut.

While Suleiman ordered the execution, Roxolana was rumored as its architect. To historians, this remains "a matter of conjecture," wrote Galina Yermolenko, author of *Roxolana in European Literature, History and Culture*, and yet Roxolana "might have exploited the rumors against Ibrahim and influenced Suleiman's decision." As early as 1526, Pierce noted, Roxolana informed Suleiman of tensions with Ibrahim and lost little time securing the newly vacant post for Rustem, husband of her daughter, Mihrimah.

In 1541 a fire in the Old Palace inched her closer to the pinnacle of power. Located in the center of the city, the Old Palace was the official residence for both the sultan and the harem. The newer Topkapı Palace, on a promontory overlooking the Bosporus, served as seat of the court. After the fire, Roxolana convinced Suleiman to relocate the harem to Topkapı. The move permitted her to be at Suleiman's side constantly, where she could advise him more closely on political matters. Writing to him while he was away, she informed him of plagues infesting the city and warned him of potential unrest. She also corresponded with the king of Poland regarding the suppression of the Crimean slave trade—a subject of doubtless personal interest.

Highest among Roxolana's priorities, however, was the welfare of her sons. The Ottoman law of imperial succession mandated fratricide to prevent princely inheritance squabbles. If Mustafa succeeded Suleiman, her four surviving sons were doomed. (Abdullah had died as a child.)

Mustafa was the "envy of all the princes," as one Ottoman historian described him, beloved by the people and the army—a bit too beloved, it seemed. By 1553 rumors of Mustafa's plans to usurp his father reached Suleiman's ear, driven primarily (according to court gossip) by Rustem and Mihrimah who in turn may have been egged on by Roxolana. Suleiman reportedly watched from behind a curtain while Mustafa was strangled with a silken cord.

The dramatic downfalls of Roxolana's rivals, the tectonic shifts in government policies she seemed to inspire—plus Suleiman's unwavering devotion—all fueled inevitable jealousies, suspicions and rumors.

"[T]he entire court hate[s] her and her children likewise, but because the Grand Turk loves her very much, no one dares to speak," wrote Venetian courtier Luigi Bassano, adding that Suleiman's subjects attributed Roxolana's power over him to magic, calling her *ziadi* (witch).

While rational critics have since ruled this out, most early modern historians continued to portray Roxolana as a ruthless schemer. More recent scholars say this may be unfair.

In the first place, wrote Godfrey Goodwin, author of *The Private World of Ottoman Women*, "most of what is known is gossip fed to Europeans who had never even stepped inside the [palace] and whose informants told them what they wanted to hear but not what they really knew, which was mostly nothing." In Yermolenko's opinion, Roxolana's critics "tend to overlook the fact that she had to fight for her own survival and the survival of her children in the very competitive world of the imperial harem…. [Roxolana] was thus unjustly and harshly judged by her contemporaries for surviving and doing so brilliantly."

Despite her detractors, Roxolana held her head high and carried on with her royal duties. She established *waqf*s (charitable endowments) and endorsed grand-scale building projects. Her largesse included a development by the new royal architect Sinan that included a mosque, two *madrasa*s (Qur'anic schools), a soup kitchen, a hospital (still in use today as a women's medical center) and an elementary school—all in Istanbul's Avrat Pazari district, site of the women's slave market where she herself had once been sold.

Here again Roxolana broke precedent. In the past, endowments of concubine mothers were limited to provincial cities, "while the sultan alone was responsible for the most splendid projects in the capital of Istanbul," noted Pierce.

Roxolana died of an unknown disease on April 18, 1558. Even in death, she defied protocol: adjacent to the newly built Suleymaniye mosque, her tomb was erected beside the place set for her husband, making her "the first woman in Ottoman harem history to have been honored in that way," wrote Yermolenko.

Suleiman lived eight more years. Roxolana's second son, Selim, succeeded him, Mehmed having died as a young man.

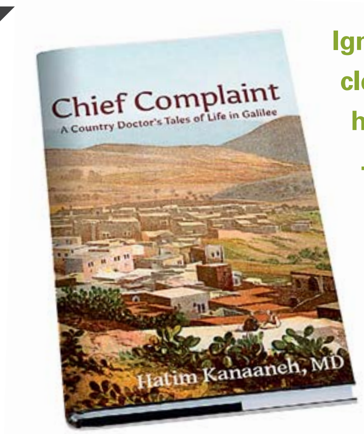
Yet while he and subsequent male rulers often stumbled, Roxolana established an environment where women ably took their places. They included Selim's wife, Nurbanu, as well as regents Kosem and Turhan, who ruled during the late 17th century. These and other such women stood upon the slight yet steadfast shoulders of the queen who proved she was strong enough, in character, to bear the weight of an empire. ⊕

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REVIEWS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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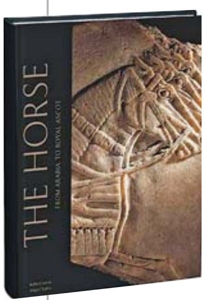


Ignoring the pleas of their younger companions, the two cleared a heavy cover of pine needles with their bare hands to expose the foundation of Yunis's former home. … I prepared myself mentally to revive a fainting old man …. But he wiped his eyes dry with the edge of his white headdress and then reminded himself of how sweet the figs in his yard once were—and the almonds and the pomegranates.

Chief Complaint—A Country Doctor's Tales of Life in Galilee

Hatim Kanaaneh. 2015, Just World Books, 978-1-93598-234-0, $20.99 pb.

Hatim Kanaaneh was 11 in 1948 when Palestinians who remained behind during the Nakba (Diaspora) became reluctant citizens of Israel. Twenty-two years later, with degrees from Harvard, Kanaaneh returned to his village in Galilee as its first Western-trained physician. This is a collection of fictionalized vignettes based on cases during his half-century of practicing medicine. "I have set myself the task of telling the story of my village to the world, in the hope of breaking the imposed silence and isolation of the Palestinian community in Israel," he writes. "Insomnia," for example, tells the story of an elderly exile who returns for the first time to visit the ruins of his village and recover the coffeepots his wife buried as they fled in 1948. His grandson wants the heirloom pots sent to him in Berlin, but in the end it is agreed that they remain in Galilee. "It was enough that they had been exiled from their homeland," he tells his grandfather, saying the coffee set "will stay and anchor his descendants as they ply the stormy seas of their diaspora." Kanaaneh writes with the wisdom of a healer who knows that his senior patients often came for more than medical advice. —PINEY KESTING



The Horse: From Arabia to Royal Ascot

John Curtis and Nigel Tallis. 2012, British Museum Press, 978-0-71411-183-4, £25 pb; 978-0-71411-185-8, £40 hb; or £10/£5 from the British Museum while supplies last.

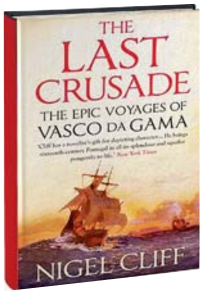
This beautifully illustrated volume, designed to accompany an exhibition at the British Museum, is a paean to the horse in general and the Arabian horse in particular. It tells the story of the long relationship between man and horse, beginning millennia ago and continuing to the present day. Along the way the reader is introduced to the swift chariot horses of the ancient world, the elegant mounts of the age of Islamic expansion and perhaps most beautiful of all, the fiery horses of the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, prehistoric stone carvings of equines recently discovered in southwestern Saudi Arabia suggest a possible early origin for this iconic animal. More than 50 additional maps and photographs accompany the introductory text. The concluding chapters focus on the contributions of Lady Anne and Wilfrid Blunt to the preservation of the Arabian horse and the critical role the Arabian played in the development of the modern thoroughbred. Each of the 250 artifacts in the exhibition, including many from Saudi Arabia, appears in color in the 188-page catalog section of the book. —JANE WALDRON GRUTZ



In Search of Kings and Conquerors: Gertrude Bell and the Archaeology of the Middle East

Lisa Cooper. 2016, I.B. Tauris, 978-1-84885-498-7, $29.50 hb.

Born into British aristocracy in 1868, Gertrude Bell is famous for her dashing travel adventures to archeological sites in the Middle East—among them Babylon, Assur, Nimrud and Mosul; her association with T. E. Lawrence and Arab leaders; and her important contribution to British intelligence and the creation of Iraq after World War I. But when it comes to exploring the region's ancient past, most of her 10 previous biographies indicate she was more of a dilettante than a serious archeologist, a legacy she craved. Cooper, who visited many of Bell's dig sites and pored over her papers, diaries and field notebooks, contends that her contributions to archeology are indeed valuable and given short shrift by earlier biographers. She cleverly connects Bell's work to more recent excavations, all of which has become immensely useful with losses from the Syrian civil war. Despite her accurate observations, in many ways Bell still appears a dilettante: Of her recording of the Mesopotamian site of Ukhaidir, she said, "I shall publish it in a big monograph all to itself and it will make a flutter in the dovecotes." Cooper's volume is eminently readable for amateurs and professionals, especially with the inclusion of more than 100 Bell photos. Academic reception to Bell's archeological work remains mixed. —GRAHAM CHANDLER

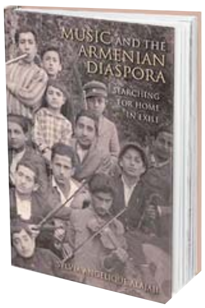


The Last Crusade: The Epic Voyages of Vasco da Gama

Nigel Cliff. 2012, Harper Perennial, 978-0-06173-513-4, $17.99 pb.

"What Columbus had promised, Gama had delivered." So Cliff sums up Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama's discovery in 1498 of a sea route to spice-laden India. Both explorers sought to break the Arab-Islamic monopoly on trade with the distant East. While Columbus's quest was blocked by the Americas, Gama rounded Africa and became the first European to gain direct access to the grand cities of India's west coast, where spices, silks, gems and other rare goods from farther east were gathered for shipment aboard Muslim vessels to ports in Arabia and Egypt, then conveyed by Venetians and others to Europe. Cliff brings this history alive through eyewitness accounts. Outwardly, the Portuguese were on a "Last Crusade," declared by King Manuel, to destroy the power of the Muslims. Their true goal was to divert the flow of Asian mercantile wealth directly to Lisbon. Portuguese ships made effective use of the latest European weaponry and maritime technologies, dominating the Indian Ocean. Cliff captures the flavor of the era, carrying the reader along with the force of a juggernaut. His analysis of broader regional geopolitics can be unpersuasive at times, but the intensity of the read makes it all worthwhile.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

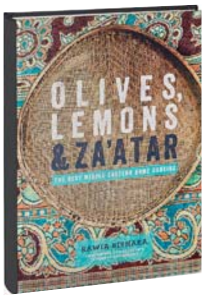


Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile

Sylvia Angelique Alajaji. 2015, Indiana UP, 978-0-25301-761-1, $25 pb.

This engaging book explores the complex ways in which music embodies Armenian identity. Starting with the transcriptions of folksongs by Soghomon Soghomonian, or Komitas (1869-1935), considered the father of Armenian music, the author traces the sounds of Armenian communities in exile in the early 20th century. In the 1920s and '30s, New York's restaurant and nightclub scene featured Armenian musicians performing folk and classical ensemble music of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Anatolia in a style known as Kef Time. Meanwhile, émigrés in Beirut sang traditional and political songs in large choirs in Armenian. In the 1960s pop-music stars, led by Adiss, created a new style, Estradayin, bringing Armenian music to the wider world. Thousands of Lebanese Armenians moved to California during and after the Lebanese civil war, bringing their music with them. There, these disparate, yet linked, musical styles coexist (although the place of Kef Time in the genre remains controversial), reflecting the many ways Armenians continue to express their identity in music. The book provides links to 10 musical tracks that illustrate the music it discusses.

—KAY CAMPBELL

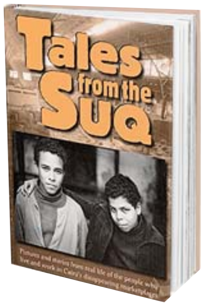


Olives, Lemons & Za'atar

Rawia Bishara. 2014, Kyle Books, 978-1-90686-884-0, $29.95 hb.

There's carrying coals to Newcastle, and then there's bringing *za'atar* to Brooklyn. Rawia Bishara accomplished the latter in 1998 by opening the doors of Tanoreen, a Middle Eastern restaurant in the Bay Ridge section. The establishment has been featured in the pages of *Gourmet, The New Yorker* and *The New York Times,* yet Bishara never let the attention go to her head. Her success lies in sticking close to her Palestinian Arab roots (she hails from Nazareth) when offering up such home-based dishes as *kafta* (ground lamb with onions and spices), *fattoush* (a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, red onion, herbs and crunchy bits of pita) and, of course, *falafel.* ("It is to Arabs what a hamburger is to Americans," she writes.) Bishara shares her recipes for these and other classics, together with informative and engaging sidebars and headnotes, in this beautifully produced volume that is sophisticated enough for the accomplished cook, yet features recipes simple enough for the novice.

—TOM VERDE

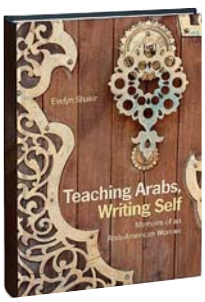


Tales from the Suq

Stephen Farley. 2014, CreateSpace, 978-1-50057-446-8, $14.99 pb.

Stephen Farley is an Arizona photographer, state senator and activist. In 1983, he traveled to Cairo to spend a year. As a student at the American University in Cairo, he came to know a local marketplace or *suq* in nearby Bab el-Louq. Here he captures his encounters with the fascinating people of the suq—a collection of food stalls and grocery shops, independently owned and gathered within the walls of what had once been a huge British munitions warehouse. Farley paints vivid profiles of the shop owners and workers, describing their relationships, personal and mercantile. He depicts a moment in time, a glimpse of a distinctive neighborhood on the verge of passing into the annals of urban history. City life in Cairo has always been richly textured, gritty, filled with sounds and smells and raw kinetic energy. It has also been a vessel of human emotion, displaying the best and worst of humanity. Without exaggerating or overdramatizing, Farley manages to show this captivating side of the legendary metropolis.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

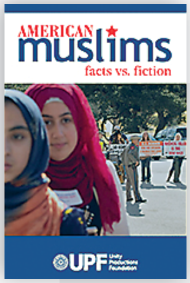


Teaching Arabs, Writing Self: Memoirs of an Arab American Woman

Evelyn Shakir. 2014, Olive Branch Press, 978-1-56656-924-8, $20 pb.

Evelyn Shakir's memoir, published four years after her death, explores Arab American identity on two fronts: at home in the US and when making a pilgrimage to the Arab world, as she did to teach literature at the University of Bahrain and the University of Damascus. Shakir is considered a pioneer in establishing Arab American literature as a genre. Born in 1938 to Lebanese immigrants, she wrote *Bint Arab* (1997), chronicling her mother's generation, the earliest wave of immigration from the Arab world, and contrasting it, through oral histories, to later generations of Arab American women. Her short-story collection, *Remember Me to Lebanon*, won the Arab American Book Award in 2007. *Teaching Arabs, Writing Self* begins with recollections of her childhood in Massachusetts. Her Arab Americanism becomes a fresher topic when she teaches in Bahrain in 2005 as a Fulbright Scholar. "I'd been expecting a mirror and found a window.... Though, yes, I could still detect a family resemblance," she writes. Later that year, she goes to Damascus and writes more as an American visitor than an Arab seeking her heritage. She lovingly describes a quirky city, albeit under dictatorship, no longer recognizable in daily news reports today.

—ALIA YUNIS



American Muslims: Fact vs. Fiction

Alex Kronemer, director. 2015, Unity Productions Foundation.

What if the US's 7 million Muslims were the solution, not the problem? This short film shows that this is already the case. To combat the negative perceptions that 48 percent of Americans have about Islam, it lays out the facts about Muslims in America, presented like the results of a Gallup poll, which is one of the sources in the film, as is the Pew Forum. There is no creative directing, camerawork or editing here, thus little distraction from the information presented, making it particularly useful for those searching for statistical proof that Muslims share similar values and lifestyles with other Americans, whether in sports or the belief in salvation. They are also active in community service, with 100 free clinics run by Muslim doctors. Shots of Muslim Americans at work and play and statistical graphs are interspersed with leaders of NGOs geared toward interfaith understanding. In the second half, religious leaders cite passages from the Qur'an that counter the notion that Islam advocates violence.

—ALIA YUNIS

EVENTS & EXHIBITIONS

Highlights from our searchable listings at aramcoworld.com

CURRENT / SEPTEMBER

Nasser Al Salem: *The State of Affairs*. Makkah-born calligrapher Nasser Al Salem pushes the boundaries of this centuries-old and most traditional of Islamic arts by tapping its mixed-media and conceptual potential. Composed in the devotional tradition, his work is inspired by the Qur'an and the tenets of Islam. Athr, **Jiddah**, through September 18.

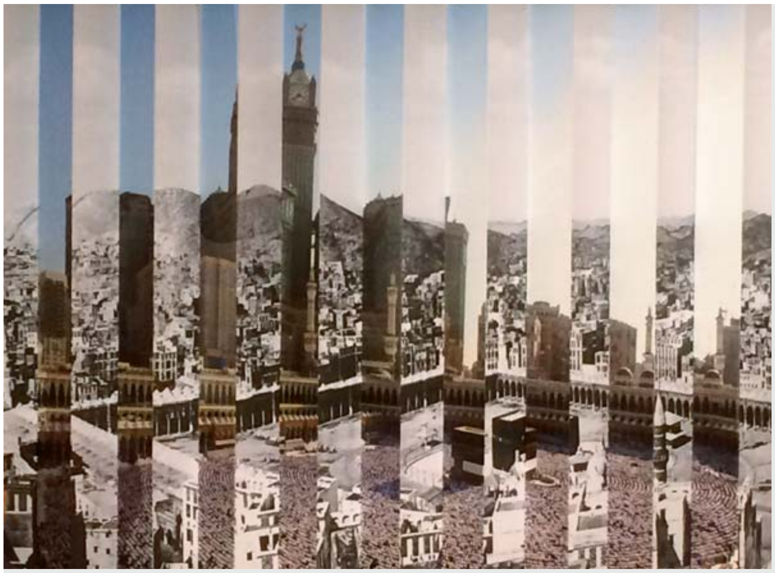
From Alexandria to Abu Simbel: *Egypt in Early Photographs 1849–1875* showcases some 60 vintage prints that offer insights into the era of early photographs. Soon after the invention of photography in 1839, the first photographers traveled to the Nile to make images of Egyptian monuments. Most were artists fascinated by this new medium who showed their work at exhibitions. In addition to Egypt, many photographers visited other sites throughout the Levant. In Egypt they traveled by boat to Abu Simbel in the far south, and some even continued up the Nile into Nubia and Sudan. Kunsthistoriches Museum, **Vienna**, through September 25.

CURRENT / OCTOBER

Harun Farocki: *Empathy*. Two years after the death of Germany-based Harun Farocki, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, in collaboration with the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM), presents the second half of a project that brings together the more than 120 films and installations of a man whose career as a filmmaker, author, artist, critic and activist made him a seminal figure of the second half of the 20th century. While the selection at IVAM focuses on his research on surveillance cameras and the "technification" of vision, the Fundació Antoni Tàpies presents a series of emblematic works analyzing new forms of labor arising from capitalist production demand, especially those that require the mobilization of more subjective and human aspects than those hitherto employed. The notion of empathy, taken from a text by Farocki, guides the selection of works. Farocki's work is founded on an idea of cinema as something that avoids the illusions of an innocent image in favor of ideological transmission. Fundació Antoni Tàpies, **Barcelona,** through October 16.

Shahzia Sikander: *Ecstasy As Sublime, Heart As Vector*. Pakistani artist Shahzia Sikander observes the present through the lens of imagination, symbols, literature and history of diverse cultural traditions. For this exhibition the artist has created a layout specific for the museum, with more than 30 works in various forms of media and idioms, from drawing to miniatures referring to the Indo-Persian tradition and from video to digital animation. The exhibit looks critically at historical, literary and political positions that delineate the inherent complexity of universal themes, ranging from pre-colonial to post-colonial periods, geopolitical changes, migration, cultural quarantine and the birth of nations and religion, and ultimately human identity. Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo, **Rome**, through October 23.

Contrast Syria: *Photographs by Mohamad al-Roumi*. As the global image of Syria has become dominated by war and refugees,



RICHARD DOUGHTY

Makkah-born artist Ahmad Angawi uses a three-dimensional lenticular construction to juxtapose a 19th-century photograph of Makkah's Great Mosque with a contemporary one in *Wijha 2: 148.* "Wijha" translates as "direction," and indeed the piece shows the past, the present or their blending depending upon the direction from which it is viewed. The image above shows the photographic construction as viewed at its center, where the images are equal.

PARALLEL KINGDOM: *Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia*

This cross-generational survey offers insights into contemporary Saudi culture through the creativity and vision of 12 of the kingdom's most influential emerging artists today, including the popular online television network Telfaz11, which has helped Saudi comedians and humorists win global exposure. Organized by the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, the exhibit explores the complexity of the issues faced by a new generation in Saudi Arabia, challenging hyperbole and contradictions that often sculpt narratives of the kingdom internationally while also questioning common Western perceptions of Saudi society. The goal is to open dialogue and further understanding. Station Museum of Contemporary Art, **Houston,** through October 2.

Syrian photographer Mohamad al-Roumi's extraordinary life's work shows many very different sides of Syria. Pictures made in the 1990s capture Syria's northeastern provinces, with their nomadic populations and poverty-stricken towns—places many refugees who have arrived in Europe call home. This exhibition, organized in cooperation with the Syrian Heritage Archive Project and supported by the German Foreign Office, helps visitors understand the fullness of Syria, which has been home for millennia to diverse people from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Pergamonmuseum, **Berlin**, through October 30.

CURRENT / NOVEMBER

Waterscapes: *Islamic Architecture and Art from Doris Duke's Shangri La*. Doris Duke, art collector and philanthropist, had two great passions: her love of water and her love of Islamic art and architecture. Both came together spectacularly at Shangri La, her oceanfront estate in Honolulu and the only home she built for herself from the ground up, beginning in the late 1930s. *Waterscapes* explores the theme of water through objects on loan from Shangri La, including photographs of the property and historic sites that inspired its many fountains, pools and cascades, as well as home movies from Duke's travels in North Africa, the Middle East and India to buy art and furnishings. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated publication by guest curators and Islamic art scholars Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom. Rough Point, **Newport, Rhode Island**, through November 6.

Courting to Contract: *Love and Marriage in Iran*. This display explores love and courtship through drawings, illustrated manuscript pages and objects, depicting scenes and classical Persian accounts of celebrated romances. Illuminated Persian marriage contracts (*ghabaleh*), along with a Judeo-Persian example (*ketubbah*) and an Old Babylonian contract carved onto a clay tablet, reflect the legal and social aspects of marriage and its roots in ancient tradition. The works are complemented by a number of richly embroidered textiles, including wedding garments and accessories. Dating mainly between the 16th and the 20th centuries, these objects situate love and marriage within the histories, narratives and contexts of people from the Middle East and Central Asia. The British Museum, **London**, through November 20.

Our Enemies: *Lively Scenes of Love & Combat.* Award-winning Egyptian American playwright Youssef El Guindi focuses on struggling writer Gamal, who despises the way his fellow Arab Americans represent their culture in American media. It's easy enough to take out his frustration on literature superstar Mohsen and local mosque leader Sheikh Alfani. But when his own girlfriend (and novelist) Noor gets an offer from a major publisher backed with a national media campaign, how will Gamal manage his frustration? El Guindi holds the honor of being the most-produced writer at Golden Thread, winning the Steinberg/American Theater Critics Association's New Play Award in 2012 and receiving the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. Golden Thread Middle East Center Stage, **San Francisco**, through November 20.

CURRENT / JANUARY

Álvaro Siza: *Gateway to the Alhambra* explores through models and sketches, renderings, large-scale photographs and video how Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza developed his design for an innovative structure that includes a courtyard, auditorium and restaurant. Enjoy architectural objects from the Alhambra's own collection and understand why the Alhambra has inspired countless artists and architects since the 14th century. Exclusive to the Toronto installation of this exhibition are a selection of ceramic tiles, marble capitals, intricately carved doors and other original architectural elements from the Alhambra that conjure the magnificent detailing of this World Heritage Site. Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through January 8.

COMING / SEPTEMBER

The 5th International Çanakkale Biennial: *Homeland*, through the renderings of artists, art and culture institutions, art critics and curators, focuses on the ideas of homeland that are bound by concepts of 20th-century nationalism and the tragedy and problematic consequences of emigration as witnessed by refugees and exiles. Inspired by the late Czech philosopher, writer and journalist Villém Flusser, himself a refugee of World War II, whose concepts on homeland penetrate to the core of the migrant and refugee tragedy today, the biennial raises questions about the sustainability of ideas on national and ethnic identity in a world whose geopolitical borders are becoming increasingly accidental and porous. Opening with discussions on traditional and post-modern societies now in flux, the biennial presents a discourse on the impact migrants and host societies have on each other. Multiple venues in **Çanakkale, Turkey**, September 24 to November 6.

Most listings have further information available online and at aramcoworld.com. Readers are welcome to submit information for possible inclusion to proposals@aramcoservices.com, subject line "E&E".

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